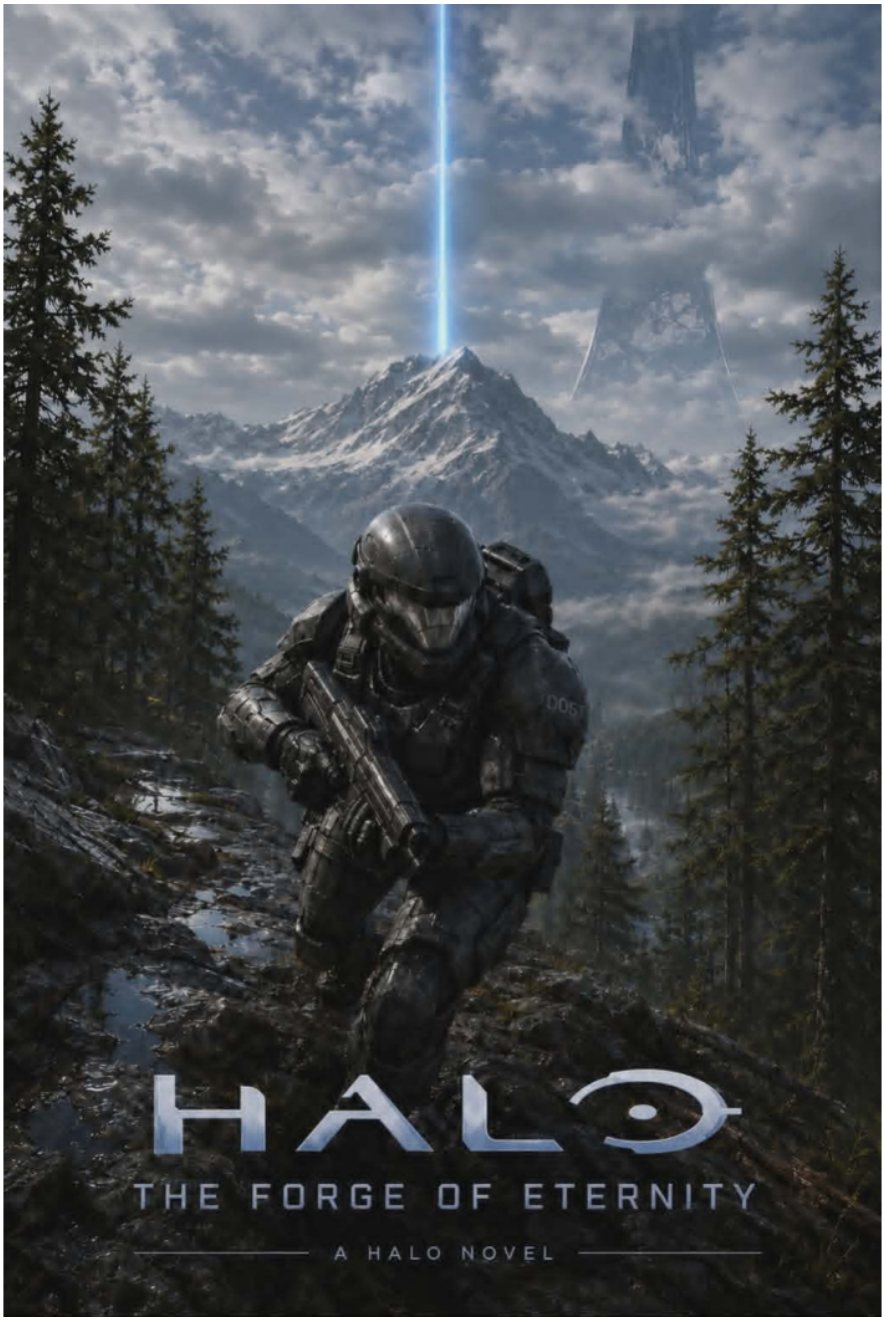
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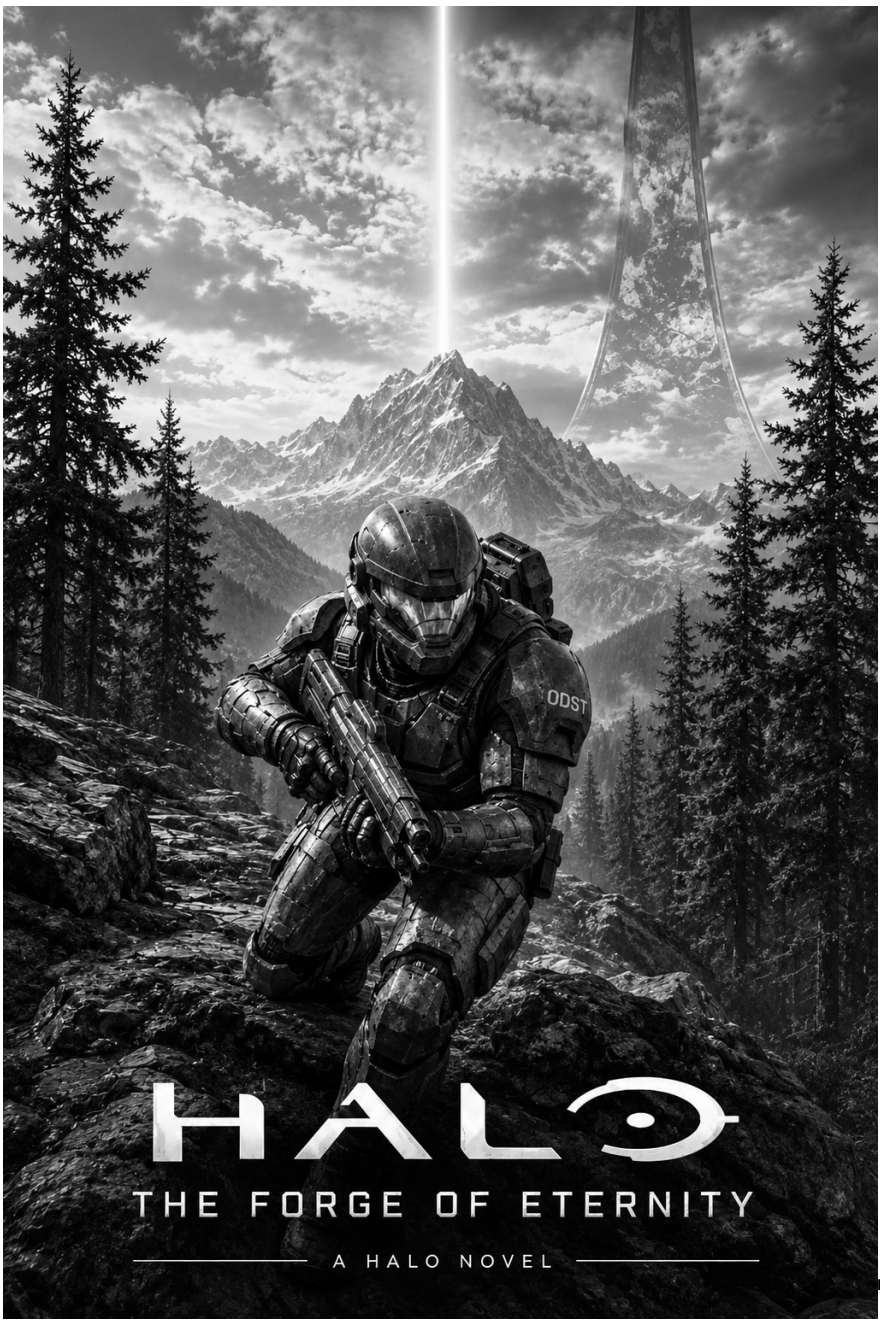

THE

FORGE OF ETERNITY

A Halo Fan Novel

"Feet First Into Hell."

Set following the events of Halo Infinite

The year is 2560.

Months after the Master Chief's victory on Installation 07, the Banished and the UNSC continue their struggle for control of the fractured Halo ring.

When a hidden Forerunner facility known as the Forge of Eternity is discovered beneath the northern territories of Zeta Halo, ODST Fireteam Gauntlet is sent to investigate.

What they find may change the fate of the ring forever.

CRISTOPHER SOTO

BASED ON THE BESTSELLING VIDEO GAME FOR XBOX

Dedicated to my wife, Abigail Pedraza.

Thank you for standing beside me through every crazy idea, every late-night writing session, and every story that began as nothing more than a random thought in my head.

Your love, patience, and unwavering support made this journey possible. When I doubted myself, you believed in me. When I wanted to quit, you encouraged me to keep going.

This story exists because you never stopped believing that it could.

And to every Halo fan who still looks up at the stars and dreams of distant worlds, ancient mysteries, and impossible heroes:

Keep dropping feet first into hell.

See you on the battlefield.

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PROLOGUE

Installation 07.

Zeta Halo.

One of the oldest, largest, and most mysterious constructs ever built by the Forerunners.

For centuries, it existed only as another classified entry buried beneath layers of ONI archives and fragmented historical records. Then humanity found it.

And everything changed.

In the aftermath of the Created uprising and the rise of Cortana's empire, the UNSC Infinity arrived at Zeta Halo seeking answers. What it found instead was war.

The Banished.

Led by the Jiralhanae warlord Atriox, the Banished launched a devastating assault against the Infinity. One of humanity's greatest warships was crippled within minutes. Thousands of personnel were killed, scattered, or stranded across the ring.

The UNSC presence on Installation 07 collapsed almost overnight.

For six months, the Banished dominated the ring.

Marine units were hunted down.

Forward Operating Bases fell one after another.

Survivors fought desperate battles in forests, mountains, and ancient Forerunner facilities whose purpose had been forgotten long before humanity first learned to make fire.

Many believed the war for Zeta Halo was already lost.

Then the Master Chief returned.

Petty Officer John-117.

The Spartan known throughout human space simply as the Master Chief.

Recovered adrift in space by a lone pilot, Chief returned to the ring and began what should have been an impossible campaign.

He dismantled Banished outposts.

Destroyed key military installations.

Liberated UNSC survivors.

Eliminated high-ranking Banished commanders.

And struck directly at the leadership responsible for humanity's defeat.

One by one, the enemies occupying Installation 07 fell.

War Chiefs.

Spartan Killers.

Elite Commanders.

Veterans who had survived decades of conflict.

None of them could stop him.

The Banished suffered catastrophic losses.

Their control over the ring fractured.

Entire regions once considered lost were reclaimed by surviving UNSC forces.

Yet victory remained incomplete.

Atriox vanished.

Ancient secrets hidden beneath the ring remained undiscovered.

Forerunner facilities continued to awaken.

And scattered reports spoke of something else.

Something older.

Something hidden beneath layers of Forerunner security protocols.

The Master Chief had won the battle for survival.

But Installation 07 still held countless mysteries.

The Banished knew it.

ONI knew it.

And somewhere within the endless wilderness of the ring, new players were already searching for answers.

Some sought power.

Some sought knowledge.

Some sought weapons.

Others sought things far more dangerous.

Because buried beneath forests, mountains, and forgotten ruins, Zeta Halo still concealed secrets capable of changing the fate of the entire galaxy.

And sooner or later, someone was going to find them.

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST CONTACT

The first thing Corporal Mateo “Mutt” Alvarez smelled when the hatch blew was burnt insulation and wet dirt.

Not blood.

Not plasma scorch.

Not the copper stink of opened guts.

Just mud and rain.

Cold black mud from Installation 07.

Zeta Halo.

His head was still a mess, like a huge migraine had decided To make war on his brain.

The ringworld looked green from orbit. Forests. Mountains. Rivers cutting through impossible hexagonal valleys like God himself had taken a knife to the planet and folded the pieces wrong.

On the ground, though?

It smelled like a grave left open too long.

The Drop-Pod slammed sideways through a stand of alien pine and buried itself half a meter deep in frozen earth. Warning klaxons screamed in Mutt’s helmet while smoke filled the cramped coffin around him.

“—shit—shit—”

He kicked the hatch release twice before the explosive bolts finally detonated.

Daylight punched into the pod.

Gray sky.

Rain.

Wind moving through shattered trees.

No comms.

Of course.

Mutt dragged himself out of the drop pod with his MA40 hanging from its sling and his left shoulder screaming from impact trauma. His HUD flickered unstable telemetry across the visor:

UNSC SIGNAL: LOST
BATTLENET: OFFLINE
TACMAP: UNAVAILABLE
STATUS: ISOLATED

“Great start…” he muttered, as he cracked his neck.

Somewhere far away, artillery rumbled.

Not UNSC artillery.

Banished.

You learned the difference fast on Zeta Halo.

UNSC guns cracked sharp and clean.

Banished weapons sounded ugly. Heavy. Like industrial machinery murdering sheet metal.

WHUMP.

WHUMP.

WHUMP.

He checked the rifle. Thirty-six rounds.

Sidearm. One mag.

Combat knife.

A ration bar crushed into powder.

He scanned the forest.

Broken trunks.

Blackened bark.

Spent plasma residue staining rocks turquoise.

Something dead nearby.

Probably several somethings.

That was normal now.

Three months after the Master Chief blew a hole through the Banished occupation network, Zeta Halo was still a butcher shop spread across thousands of kilometers.

The UNSC had clawed back fragments. (Forward Operating Base) FOBs. Air corridors. Supply routes that stayed alive for maybe a week before Banished raiding parties torched them again.

But that didn't stop the top brass at ONI from obsessing over that damn ring. Hell no. If anything, it only made them more interested. Dozens of facilities scattered across Zeta Halo filled with mysteries only the UNSC's "big brains" could even begin to understand. Rare mineral deposits. Forerunner alloys. Strange wildlife and vegetation. Every inch of the ring was something to study, exploit, and weaponize — all "for the good of humanity," or at least that's what the propaganda posters claimed aboard every UNSC ship and inside every mess hall.

And that was exactly why his team had been sent there.

Designation: GAUNTLET.

Though like most ODST squads, they were really just a collection of violent misfits wearing expensive armor and military-grade augmentations… or at least slightly better gear than the rest of the poor bastards in the Marine Corps.

Nobody talked about "winning" anymore.

Just surviving long enough to hold ground.

Mutt started walking north.

According to the last nav-point before the battlenet died, Fireteam Gauntlet was supposed to regroup at FOB CONDOR.

Assuming CONDOR still existed.

Assuming Gauntlet still existed.

Rain hammered against his visor as he pushed through the treeline.

And then he heard singing.

Deep voices.

Rhythmic.

Wrong.

Mutt froze instantly.

Banished.

Not close.

Maybe eighty meters downslope.

He crouched behind a fallen trunk and switched the visor magnification on.

Through the rain he spotted movement between the rocks below.

Jiralhanae.

Brutes.

Five of them.

One massive bastard in grey armor stood near a fire pit while two others dragged something across the mud.

Human bodies.

UNSC Marines.

Dead for maybe a day.

The Brutes had tied their ankles together with power cable and were laughing while they hauled them toward the camp.

Mutt felt the familiar tightening in his chest.

Not fear.

Not exactly.

Just anger.

Because this shit never ended on Zeta.

The Banished weren't Covenant.

That was the first lesson every survivor learned.

The Covenant killed because they believed they were holy.

The Banished killed because they enjoyed hearing bones break.

The big Brute barked something in rough Jiralhanae.

Mutt's translation software caught fragments:

"—human cowards—"
"—Atriox was right—"
"—flesh weak—"

One of the smaller Brutes ripped a Marine helmet off a corpse and jammed it onto a stick beside the fire like a trophy.

Mutt's fingers tightened around the MA40.

Five Brutes.

Too many for a clean fight.

Especially alone.

Especially with limited ammo.

The smart play was to move.

Avoid contact.

Find Gauntlet.

Reach CONDOR.

Report enemy activity.

That's what a Spartan would do.

Hell, Mutt had heard the stories about the Master Chief more times than he could count. The giant in green armor that looked more like a walking tank than a human being. The man who somehow kept surviving the impossible. Entire packs of Brutes, Covenant warships, Flood outbreaks — none of it seemed to mean a damn thing to that monster pulled straight out of history books… or maybe the Bible itself.

But Mutt wasn't the Chief.

He wasn't even a Spartan.

He was just another ODST trying very hard not to die on a ringworld that had already swallowed armies whole.

Damn right ODSTs weren't Spartans

And five of those sons of bitches in an open-field fight were more than enough to kill a soldier like him.

Mutt thumbed the rifle to burst-fire.

Then stopped.

Movement again.

Not Brutes.

Human.

A figure crawled through the rocks west of the camp wearing shredded UNSC camouflage.

Sniper rifle.

Slow movements.

Mutt zoomed in harder.

Female.

ODST helmet painted with faded white fangs around the visor.

Recognition hit immediately.

“Aw, fuck me…”

Lieutenant Hana Vuković.

Callsign: Rook.

The meanest sniper in the 65th Shock Troopers.

And the team’s official tracker, sniper, and certified badass.

And Saber Team was the forward assault unit.

Sure, every ODST lived by the same motto:

Feet first into hell.

But for Saber, it was probably more like:

Full fucking body, full speed, straight into hell.

Because command always sent those poor bastards into the worst missions imaginable.

And somehow—

they always delivered.

Well… almost always.

Apparently even they couldn’t pass Zeta Halo’s little fucking test.

The message that reached Gauntlet was short and ugly:

SABER TEAM — KIA.

Every last one of them.

And there she was.

Officially KIA during the retreat during the assault on the northern side of the mountain — part of a secondary operation running parallel to ours six days ago.

Unofficially?

ODSTs kept surviving things that should kill them.

Rook raised one hand slightly without looking toward Mutt.

She already knew he was there.

Of course she fucking did.

Then she held up three fingers.

Three seconds.

Mutt exhaled slowly.

Adjusted position.

Aimed at the Brute nearest the fire.

Rain hissed across the barrel.

One.

Two.

Three.

Rook's S7 sniper rifle thundered first.

The grey-armored Brute's head exploded into blue gore and shattered teeth.

Mutt opened fire a half-second later.

And Zeta Halo erupted into violence again.

As if Zeta Halo wasn't already violent enough on its own.

CHAPTER TWO

BEFORE THE IMPACT

Three days earlier, Mutt had been standing in a hangar bay that smelled like hydraulic fluid, burned coffee, and somebody else's recicled farts.

It was the kind of smell that only ever lived on UNSC ships.

The **Broken Horizon** was a football field-sized slab of steel and bad luck hanging over Zeta Halo in a low, ugly orbit.

The ship had been deployed from a nearby colony world shortly after the latest miracles pulled off by humanity's favorite man in green. Officially, it was sent as immediate support for the remaining UNSC forces stationed around Zeta Halo.

Which basically meant every poor bastard aboard had exactly zero choice except to drop onto that giant metal donut and do whatever insanity the top brass decided was necessary "for the good of humanity."

…God, those slogans really were fucking catchy.

And the **Broken Horizon** lived up to her name, hull was patched in twelve places. Her decks rattled when the gravity plates hiccupped. Half the doors in the lower bays stuck if you looked at them wrong. Every damn corridor in that ship looked like it had survived a thousand battles.

Or, to put it less politely, like some old family pet nobody had the heart to put down no matter how completely fucked up the poor thing already was.

But Mutt liked ships like that.

Ships with scars made sense.

The clean ones always lied.

Especially those pretty shiny ONI ships. Sleek little cruisers packed with stealth tech, enough firepower to tear apart a Covenant destroyer… and carrying the sweet smell of roses, fresh lavender, and even fresher lies.

He stood in the shadow of a drop cradle while a maintenance drone hissed sparks into the ribs of an exposed bulkhead and Sergeant Imani Voss walked a slow circle around the rest of the squad, hands behind her back, helmet tucked under one arm.

Voss was the kind of sergeant who looked like she'd been carved out of old concrete and bad decisions. Dark skin, close-cropped hair, a jaw that never seemed to relax. She had a scar over one eyebrow from something sharp and close enough to be personal. Nobody ever asked her about it. Nobody with a functioning survival instinct, anyway.

She stopped in front of Mutt first.

"Alvarez," she said. "You still breathing?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant."

"Good. Means you're listening."

She moved down the line.

Corporal Jace Ketter was leaning on his M247H heavy machine gun like it was a barstool and not a weapon that would turn a Jiralhanae skull into paint. The damn idiot probably had the physical requirements to pass the Spartan-IV program…

Around 6'4"

Short dirty-blond hair usually kept military regulation… more or less.

Thick beard stubble that somehow survived every deployment despite UNSC grooming standards.

Basically a Viking somehow shoved into ODST armor and given military clearance.

But the psychological evaluation?
Yeah, that poor bastard wouldn't survive five minutes.

Ketter had the easy grin of a man who thought the universe was mostly bullshit and could be bullied into shape if you hit it hard enough. And to make things even better, he had a truly incredible talent for disrespecting his

superior officers… or the entire fucking UNSC whenever the opportunity presented itself.

-

Next was Specialist Dalia “TECH” Raines, the squad’s combat tech and part-time miracle worker. She had grease on her gloves, burnt solder on her sleeves, and a face so pale it made her freckles look like somebody had sprinkled her with rust. She could make a dead Mongoose sing and a dead door open.

Around 5’2” making her look even smaller standing next to armored ODSTs like Ketter or Mutt.

Barely looked strong enough to carry a standard MA40 rifle, yet somehow hauled around enough scanners, batteries, tools, and hacked equipment to repair half a damn frigate.

-

Then came Doc Elias Mercer, who wasn’t a medic in the heroic sense so much as a man who had simply accepted that bodies were temporary, repairable inconveniences. Mercer kept his kit in perfect order and his sense of humor in a shallow grave. He’d seen too much to waste time pretending it was all going to turn out fine.

Mid to late fifties, which in the UNSC honestly made him ancient by frontline deployment standards.

But despite his painfully miserable lack of enthusiasm, the old bastard had an extraordinary talent when it came to “repairing” human bodies in unbelievably bad situations, which made him a very important part of Gauntlet whether he liked it or not.

-

And last was Private Soren Bale, Newbie was the nickname everybody in Gauntlet gave him, and honestly, it fit the poor bastard perfectly. The guy was too young, too inexperienced, too damn new… and only by some miracle — or because his parents happened to be highly decorated veterans from the Covenant War — could someone like him end up wearing ODST armor.

He was nervously cleaning his MA5D like he was trying to chrome the damn thing.

Voss let the silence stretch until it got uncomfortable.

Then she slapped a data pad against her thigh.

“Listen up. This is the part where command pretends this is a normal mission and we pretend to believe them.”

Nobody laughed. Not even Ketter.

Voss keyed the pad and the holo above the deck flickered into life.

Zeta Halo rotated in blue-white wireframe.

Clusters of UNSC icons blinked across the ring like infection markers.

Recovered FOBs.

Dead zones.

Banished strongpoints.

Intermittent comm windows.

A bright red corridor cut through a stretch of ring terrain still listed as “unmapped / contested / un-fucking-survivable” by whoever had been doing the labeling.

Voss pointed at a patch of terrain north of their current position.

“Three days ago, ONI picked up a pattern. Banished forward positions are linking together. Not random camps, not scavenger nests. Real infrastructure. Power routing. Ammo flow. Relay chains. They’re turning chunks of this ring into a fortified belt.”

The ring slowly spun.

“Why does that matter?” Ketter asked.

Voss gave him a look that could have frozen whiskey.

“Because the damn Banished aren’t just controlling sectors that already have half the UNSC trapped on this filthy ring — they’ve also got a strategic interest in taking over every FOB across the northern region.

And because it is our goddamn job to make life a little less pleasant for every Banished bastard we can find.

Understood?”

“Understood, ma’am.”

Even Ketter knew that messing with Voss when she used that tone of voice was generally considered hazardous to the health of any Marine or ODST dumb enough to try it.

Hell, the woman could probably take on a Spartan and still find time afterward to insult your combat performance.

That got the room quiet in the particular way soldiers got quiet when they realized the problem was larger than the box they were standing in.

Voss zoomed in on one node.

“The UNSC has a special interest in FOB CONDOR, which means we’re the lucky bastards getting dropped there. Our job is to recover every piece of intel left behind by the previous team — assuming those poor idiots had the courtesy to file a report before ending up KIA — and find a goddamn reason why the northern sector is so important.”

She shut the holo off.

“Command officially calls it an information recovery, strategic control, and high-value intelligence retrieval mission.”

“I call it dropping into the neighbor’s yard like a bag of shit, cleaning up somebody else’s mess, and recovering whatever little alien toy ONI suddenly decided was important.”

Nobody moved.

Voss’s eyes passed over them one by one.

“ODSTs, when you hit the dirt, you do not get to be surprised by gravity. Any of you got a problem with that, speak now and I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it.”

Ketter grinned thinly.

“Just one, Staff Sergeant.”

“Yeah?”

“Are all your motivational speeches this fucking beautiful, ma’am?”

Mech snorted. Doc Mercer didn't.

Voss swallowed hard.

And just like that, after one truly heartwarming debriefing, Gauntlet had their orders ready to drop into Zeta Halo.

A place that, if it weren't for the new invasive population trying to murder everything that moved, probably would've been the number one vacation resort in the entire goddamn galaxy.

The next couple of days was a blur of prep, gear checks, and bad jokes told by people who were trying not to admit they were scared.

Mutt's pod was being loaded with the rest of the team's Intel-kit when he finally got a good look at what they were carrying.

MA40s.

One M247H machine gun broken down into three components and a prayer.

A half-dozen shock grenades.

And, because the UNSC had a sense of humor made entirely of broken teeth, one ancient M90 shotgun passed around like a family heirloom.

There was also an old M6C/SOCOM pulled straight out of the days when ODSTs still deployed for infiltration ops.

"Ah yes… the good old days."

And of course the damn thing belonged to the oldest bastard on the team.

That pistol was almost twice the size of a standard-issue M6, and that wasn't even mentioning all the newer sidearms people kept talking about in the mess halls lately. Those shiny new SIDEKICK pistols:
smaller,
tougher,
sleeker.

But of course there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of finding next-generation weapons aboard the old *Broken Horizon*. Just the usual propaganda pamphlets designed to leave everyone onboard excited and emotionally moist over equipment they were never actually going to get.

And Newbie, proving that his nickname was painfully well-earned, made the

mistake of touching the damn thing.

Doc Mercer slowly looked up at him with the kind of expression that clearly said:

I am about to violate several medical oaths if you touch my shit again, boy.

Everyone looked at him.

The kid froze instantly, like a rabbit realizing a very old wolf had just noticed him.

Ketter laughed and smacked him on the shoulder.

“Relax, kid. That old goat’s just emotionally attached to memories from ancient fucking history.”

“I was just trying to help carry the gear…”
Newbie raised both hands defensively.

“And once we get to FOB CONDOR, I’ll buy the Doc a drink.”

“Don’t go offering drinks unless you’ve got enough credits for the whole damn team… especially if you plan on staying on my good side.”

“And that’s assuming some fucking miracle gets us to CONDOR in one piece.”

Doc Mercer had already decided to completely ignore the pair of idiots in front of him and hurried to secure his gear inside the drop pod, repacking trauma injectors into his medical harness.

Mutt looked toward the aging drop pod and asked,

“Hey Doc… you think these old drop pods can actually get us where we’re supposed to land?”

Mercer snorted while locking medical cases into place.

“Son, these damn things never worked properly. Not in my days, not in yours.”
He secured the final strap and glanced toward the launch bay.
“We just pray gravity does its job correctly… and hope for a miracle that once we hit that Halo thing, I won’t have to start my medical work immediately.”

It was probably the closest thing to a joke the old man could manage, and

honestly, his sense of humor had always been pretty fucking terrible.

A few minutes later Voss called them to the insertion bay.

The team moved through the corridor in silence, boots dull against steel grating. Through a cutaway in the deck, Mutt could see Zeta Halo hanging below them in fragments of storm clouds and impossible geometry. It looked absolutely beautiful from that shitty orbit. Like a clean piece of old Earth back in its “good days” — the ones with rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains instead of endless cities and oceans of beloved human concrete.

Hell, it was ugly to even think about it, but maybe the Banished would preserve that ring better than humanity ever could.

And maybe, just for a second, he finally understood why the Covenant had worshipped places like this in the first place.

At the bay, the drop pods stood in a row like black coffins.

Navigation specialists had already fed them landing vectors, thermal weather scans, geological reports, 3D terrain positioning, and maps of high electromagnetic interference zones. That last one had been the problem.

The ring did something weird to comms and nav whenever it wanted to.

Sometimes it was the allways changing weather.

Sometimes it was local gravity shear.

Sometimes it was stray Forerunner architecture broadcasting in frequencies humanity didn’t have names for.

Sometimes, according to a tech whose hands shook too much to be lying, the ring just plain hated them.

Mutt didn’t know which explanation he liked least.

Voss was the last person into the bay. She stopped in front of them, helmet under her arm again, and looked at the squad like she was trying to memorize the faces before the universe got a chance to rearrange them.

“Alright, listen up. We’re dropping in two waves. First team goes straight to the insertion point closest to CONDOR to verify whether the FOB is still under UNSC control.”

Voss brought up the tactical map between them, pale blue light reflecting

across the troop bay.

“Second team gets the scenic route — wider elliptical descent pattern. Your job is to gather terrain scans, geological data, and recon information on the northern sector during entry.”

She looked around the squad one last time.

“We regroup at CONDOR one way or another.”

Simple.

Pure ODST briefing material.

“Insertion, intel retrieval, extraction. We’ve done this a thousand times before…”

Then she glanced sideways toward Newbie, who currently looked one bad thought away from shitting himself inside the armor.

“…Well. Most of us have.”

Ketter leaned back inside the drop bay and laughed.

“Ma’am, now *that* is a beautiful speech.”
He spread his arms dramatically toward the tactical display.
“Of course we all assume everything will go perfectly on a giant metal donut floating through space, built by whatever insane alien god-knows-what came up with this shit in the first place.”

To which Voss answered completely seriously:

“Correct.”

Which, somehow, was the most terrifying part of the entire conversation.

“Alright, ODSTs, lock in. Drop pods launch in T-minus ten.”

Voss grabbed the overhead rail as warning sirens began echoing through the launch bay.

“And try not to die.”

A pause.

“That is a direct order.”

The squad answered in perfect unison:

“Ma’am, yes ma’am!”

Mutt pulled his helmet on and let the seal hiss closed.

His HUD came alive.

The team got tagged across his visor in clean white icons.

VOSS
KETTER
RAINES -MECH-
DOC MERCER
BALE -NEWBIE-

Then mission routing overlaid in amber:

OPERATION: ZETA INSERTION
PRIMARY: GEOLOGICAL DATA ANALISIS
SECONDARY: RECOVER ANY UNSC INTEL
TERTIARY: EXTRACTION

The fact that extraction had been listed as the *third* objective didn’t sit well with Mutt at all. Putting his own survival — and the team’s — at the bottom of the priority list was never exactly comforting.

But he also knew something important was happening down there.

And recovering that information was their job.

Voss tapped the side of her helmet, opening team comms.

“Last chance to whine.”

“Actually… I kinda wanted to say—”

Newbie’s voice came through the comms channel shaky.

“Too fuking bad. Because we’re already late.”

The drop lights turned green.

One by one, the pods launched.

Drop pod deployments always felt like getting your guts ripped sideways and

taking a kick straight to the balls at the exact same time. A lot of people who wanted to become ODSTs failed right there in that test — a vertical Mach 2 descent was enough to make even the toughest bastards in the UNSC Marine Corps shit themselves.

That was why only a handful of people could become part of this little elite, the best a normal human could hope to be in such a fucked-up universe.

And Mutt had probably done it at least a hundred times by now, but that didn't mean it ever became easy, comfortable, or any less painful on the balls.

The launch from orbit was bad enough. But the real problem started when the ring got involved.

Mutt's pod hit the atmosphere at a steep angle, shielded heat blazing white-hot outside the tiny viewport. For a few precious seconds the world was nothing but fire, static, and the violent shaking of a machine trying to force a human body through a place it had no business being.

Then the interference began.

The HUD flashed.

NAV ERROR
SIGNAL DEGRADED
INERTIAL COMPENSATION: UNSTABLE

And just like Doc Mercer said, these shitty pods were always failing somehow. That was why half the ODST Corps never actually made it to their intended landing zones. The poor bastards who drifted off-course usually ended up floating through space until their reserve oxygen ran out…

Or smashed into something the latest titanium-tungsten miracle shields designed by the UNSC eggheads couldn't survive — like one of the countless bullshit metal alloys the Forerunners used for damn near everything.

Mutt gripped the restraint bars hard enough to hurt.

The pod spun.

Thank God it wasn't a complete uncontrolled spin.

Because dying alone in the darkness of space was without a doubt somewhere in Mutt's personal top five list of deaths he absolutely did *not* want.

Just enough to make the horizon vanish.

Just enough to make the sky and the ground trade places like they were drunk and vicious.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered.

No one answered.

Then the ring’s surface flashed below him through a tear in the clouds.

Not terrain.

Not even close.

Through the tiny pod window, Mutt managed to catch sight of someone else’s drop pod for a brief second before it vanished into a mass of dark gray clouds.

Well… at least that meant the shitty trajectory had screwed over somebody else too and not just him.

Hooray for not being the only unlucky bastard on the team, I guess…

DESCENT CORRECTION FAILED
DESCENT CORRECTION FAILED
DESCENT—

The voice cut off in static.

A second later the pod lost its guidance entirely.

Mutt looked through the viewport and saw only a storm of broken cloud and spinning light.

Then the ground came for him.

Too fast.

Too wrong.

Mutt’s pod tore through a couple of trees before gravity finally decided to do its job. The impact against the ground at such a horrible angle could only be described as getting hit in the face by a two-hundred-pound sack of shit — ugly, disgusting, and painful all the way down to the deepest parts of your body.

Mutt slammed face-first against the front of the visor so hard that, if it hadn't been for the impact-reduction gel layers inside the helmet, his skull probably would've cracked open on the spot.

And then the world spun and spun around Mutt until, finally, everything went black.

CHAPTER THREE

ROOK

The Brute hit the ground without a head.

That was the good thing about Hana “Rook” Vuković. She didn’t waste bullets, didn’t waste breath, and didn’t waste time on anything she could put down with one clean shot. The bad thing about Rook was that when she decided you were in her line of fire, you could either move or die, and there usually wasn’t enough of either.

The remaining four Banished in the camp reacted a half-second too late.

Mutt opened fire from the treeline, stitching the nearest jackass across the chest with MA40 bursts while Rook kept the big bastard down with that S7 like she was hammering nails into a coffin lid. One of the smaller Brutes charged sideways through the rain, roaring, waving around a Brute Mangler pistol. Those damn things looked less like handguns and more like hydraulic spike drivers — the kind used to slam rivets into starship hulls and space station plating.

Except these bastards carried them around like regular sidearms.

Ketter would have called that a “stupid fucking move.”

Mutt would have called it suicidal.

Both were accurate.

The Brute got two steps in before Rook shot its knee apart. It folded with a crash into the mud. Mutt changed targets and put two rounds into the side of its skull while it was down. The body stopped moving in the middle of trying to crawl.

The last two Banished tried to retreat.

That was almost funny.

Almost.

One of them got behind a broken Warthog frame. The other tried to use the wreck as cover and got half its rib cage blown out by a round that punched through the engine block first. Mutt had no idea whether it was the Warthog's engine or one of those damned spike grenades the Banished loved using.

Either way, when it blew, it sent the poor bastard flying apart in pieces and left nothing but a purple stain across the dirt.

Didn't matter.

What mattered was that, five seconds later, the camp was dead quiet except for rain, burning equipment, and the wet little crackle of plasma residue dying in the mud.

Mutt kept his rifle up.

Rook's voice came through the squad channel, calm as a morgue drawer.

"Clear."

He lowered the MA40 a little but didn't put it down. The camp had been a Banished forward site once. Now it was a wreck of supply crates, a smashed Mongoose, a fire pit, and three dead Brutes bleeding into the earth like somebody had spilled bad wine over the whole goddamn place.

Rook stepped out from behind a ridgeline of broken stone thirty meters upslope.

She moved like a ghost that had decided to become a soldier for the sake of appearance. Winter camo over ODST armor, white-gray patterning broken by mud and ash. The fangs painted around her visor made her helmet look like a skull that had learned how to aim. Her sniper rifle was slung low, one hand on the grip, the other checking a side pouch as if she'd just finished grocery shopping and not erased half a Banished patrol from existence.

"Now *that* was a fucking job well done," Mutt muttered.

Rook stopped under a leaning black pine and looked at him through rain-streaked glass.

"You're late, your whole damn team is late."

“Yeah, well… I decided to take a couple extra rides on the fucking carousel before arriving at this beautiful place.”

She gave him the faintest shrug.

“Yeah, that sounds exactly like something somebody from Gauntlet would do,” she said with a click of her tongue.

“Where’s the rest of your team?” Rook asked Mutt.

He adjusted the rifle strap and grimaced.

“Honestly? They’re probably less fucked up than I am… though not by much.”
He glanced toward the damaged comms display on his visor.
“And communications have been completely fucked ever since my smooth little landing.”

“And speaking of that… we thought all of Saber Team was KIA.”

The second the words left his mouth, Mutt immediately realized he had fucked up.

Rook didn’t say a word.

She just drove an elbow into his ribs as she walked past him.

Hard.

Apparently hard enough to communicate:
shut the fuck up, idiot.

She knelt by the nearest dead Brute and checked its armor plates, then the belt rig slung over its torso. The Banished liked to carry UNSC junk. She was searching for some kind of long-range communications device, though so far she wasn’t having much fucking luck.

Mutt moved closer, keeping an eye on the tree line.

“How the hell did you get here?”

Rook answered with a sarcastic snort.
“I’m here for the same reason you are — shit luck. And if you actually used that thick skull of yours, you’d notice the little blue dot on the tac-map telling us where the fucking FOB Condor is.”

After his stupid crack about Rook's entire squad being KIA, Mutt felt like he deserved every single word Rook wanted to throw at him.

Mutt looked at her more carefully then.

She was dirty. More than dirty. Exhausted, too. There was a cut on the side of her jaw where the rain had washed blood thin and red over the camo paint. Her left shoulder plate had been repaired with what looked like Banished scrap and field tape. Her rifle barrel was wrapped near the fore-end with heat shielding that shouldn't have worked and probably did anyway.

She'd been surviving the hard way.

Whatever the hell had happened in the northern sector of the ring — where Saber had been deployed — it had to've been a goddamn nightmare. And Mutt knew she was the most badass bastard in that entire squad, so he decided to keep his mouth shut for once.

She keyed her helmet and opened a local burst transmission. A thin crackle answered.

Mutt heard it at the same time she did.

Not static.

Human.

Very weak.

Very alive.

"Think it's your squad… or maybe some Marine detachment?" Rook asked.

"No clue," Mutt answered. "Signal's weak as hell, and only local comm channels seem to work through whatever electromagnetic bullshit's been screwing us since we got here."

Thinking about it now… it had started even before they crashed.

That same interference was exactly what had nearly split his skull open with migraines back then.

The burst repeated.

…t… up…
…Mutt…

…if you can hear this…

He froze.

Voss.

The signal was chopped to hell, but it was her voice.

Mutt's throat went tight for a second before he forced it open again.

"Sergeant?"

No answer. Another burst of static and one broken syllable.

…FOB…
…CONDOR…
…close…

Then silence.

Rook listened for a long beat, visor pointed toward the stormy treeline like she could force the ring itself to confess by staring at it hard enough.

"CONDOR," she said.

Mutt nodded.

"Yeah."

"That means they're still alive."

"Sounds like it."

Rook stood again, shifting the rifle to her shoulder.

Mutt exhaled through his teeth.

"Where is it?"

"Truth is, my telemetry tracker got wrecked in the crash."

Which was honestly a polite way of saying he'd slammed sideways at Mach 2 inside a heavy-alloy metal coffin, smashing through trees, rock, and whatever other shit the pod had plowed into after he blacked out.

Rook let out a slow breath, the kind that practically screamed, *Alright… maybe I went a little too hard calling you an idiot when you already looked*

completely fucked up.

“The FOB Condor’s somewhere northwest of our current position,” Rook said while checking the tac-map. “Problem is, the Banished control most of the major outposts between here and there — especially along the main roads.”

He glanced toward the dark forest stretching across the valley.

“Which means our only option is the woodland trail.”

Honestly, the forest trail didn’t sound that bad to Mutt.

Not compared to running headfirst into dozens of Banished troops dug into fortified positions with heavy weapons, overlapping fields of fire, and every tactical advantage imaginable.

A little mud on his boots and a four-kilometer detour carrying the full weight of an ODST combat rig, loaded mags, and all the other shit strapped to his body suddenly sounded pretty fucking reasonable.

Before Mutt even realized it, Rook was already several meters ahead of him. She glanced back over her shoulder and shouted,

“You coming, or are you gonna stand there smelling the fucking roses, soldier?”

Mutt wasted zero time. He adjusted the weight of his rifle and started moving fast to catch up with her.

Halfway down the trail, Mutt took a moment to check the pressure seals on his armor. All that rain and humidity could fry the few controls and HUD systems that were still barely functioning inside his helmet.

Nearby, Rook was busy inspecting the optics on her sniper rifle, making sure the constant rain hadn’t fucked with the scope alignment. She also checked every magazine twice — because mud inside a mag was exactly the kind of thing that got a round jammed at the absolute worst possible moment.

Years of service had taught her that lesson the hard way.

The view of Zeta Halo from that small hillside was genuinely intoxicating.

More beautiful than Mutt could’ve ever imagined.

Endless green stretched in every direction. A river carved its way through the landscape before emptying into a small lake, surrounded by wide patches of

emerald grass and strange alien wildlife moving through the misty rain.

Scattered across the terrain stood artificial structures — those massive angular Forerunner pillars, forged from dull metallic alloys illuminated by cold blue light. The contrast between the ancient machinery and the living wilderness should've looked unnatural… yet somehow it made the entire landscape even more breathtaking.

Like the ring itself was caught somewhere between paradise and a machine-built graveyard.

But the beauty of Zeta Halo was constantly scarred by Banished encampments scattered across the landscape like a spreading infection.

Watchtowers. Anti-air batteries. Barricades hammered together from scrap metal and Covenant wreckage. Smoke rising from burning fuel pits.

War had poisoned every corner of the ring.

And Rook was about to find out just how dangerously close they really were to it.

"She stepped past him and pointed with two fingers toward the west ridge.

"We're not taking the easy route after all. Banished got scouts out here. Maybe a full assault team, maybe just a bunch of jackass grunts with too much confidence and no appreciation for being shot."

Not knowing what kind of threat was waiting inside that camp had both Mutt and Rook on edge.

Rook gave the camp one last scan. One Brute corpse. Two more in the mud. Broken plasma coils hissing against wet rock. A Banished crate split open with a pile of cracked ammo cells spilling into the grass like toy blocks from hell.

Signs of a recent firefight, no doubt about it.

And as dumb and bloodthirsty as the Banished could be, they usually tried not to blow each other's fucking brains out for no reason.

Which left the most likely explanation: either the honorable Marines of the UNSC…

…or the far less honorable bastards from Gauntlet had paid the camp a visit and done one hell of a job.

Rook began moving. “Stay low. Watch the rocks. Banished like to perch with shock rifles and pretend they’re brave.”

Mutt fell in beside her.

It was odd, how fast a firefight could turn strangers into a functioning unit. Not friends. Friends was too expensive a word for a place like this. But there was rhythm to it. A shared pace. A mutual understanding that you could bitch later if you were still alive.

They moved through a ravine where black water ran over slate and roots. Zeta Halo around them looked less like a war zone now and more like a planet trying to remember what it was before anybody built an empire on top of it.

Half-buried Forerunner stone rose out of the earth in angular slabs.

Vines crawled over old metal supports.

The wind moved through shattered branches and ancient cuts in the landscape and made the whole place sound like it was breathing in its sleep.

Mutt checked his ammo while they walked.

Rook glanced at Mutt’s rifle, noticing the depressingly low ammo count.

“Running low on ammo, huh?”

Mutt shrugged. “Just another day in the park. Besides… you can do a lot with something that small, y’know?”

The second the words left his mouth, Mutt immediately realized how unbelievably bad that sounded in front of a woman.

For a brief second, Rook’s lips curled into the faintest almost-imperceptible smirk beneath her helmet.

They topped a ridge and saw the wreck of a Banished supply line below.

Three skinned Phantoms had been turned into ground clutter, burned out and collapsed around crates and wrecked machinery. A pair of Grunts were scavenging the wreckage, helmets bobbing in the rain. One of them had a fuel rod cannon twice its size propped on a crate because apparently the Banished believed in teaching their idiots to carry extremely lethal objects they had no business touching.

Rook dropped prone without hesitation.

Mutt followed.

She adjusted the rifle scope and breathed out slowly.

“I’ll take the left.”

“What about the right?”

“On second thought… I’ll take both shots,” Rook said calmly, thinking about Mutt’s low ammo reserves. At this distance, anything he fired would probably just end up as rounds buried in the dirt anyway.

The Grunts never knew what hit them.

Rook dropped the one on the left when it turned too late to matter. Then the second shot reached the other one a fraction before it could swing the fuel rod cannon around. The shot took the top of its helmet and most of the brain inside it clean off.

Damn, Mutt thought in genuine amazement.

She was really fucking good at what she did.

By the time they reached the next elevation, the terrain had started to change. More exposed rock. More alien geometry visible under the dirt. Old Forerunner cuts ran beneath the hill like veins, broken in places and exposed in others. The Banished had built on top of it all the same, throwing up scrap barricades, scavenged sensors, and ugly welded plates that looked like they’d been built by someone who hated both engineering and physics.

Rook pointed toward the horizon.

“There.”

Whether it had once been a Banished camp or an old FOB outpost was hard to tell now.

The fighting that had torn through the place had left it so completely wrecked that the difference barely mattered anymore.

And around it, smoke.

Not full destruction.

But not quiet either.

“You think they’re still in there?” Mutt asked quietly.

“Maybe,” Rook answered. “It’s an easier position to defend. If I were waiting for my squad…”

The thought hit her like a punch to the ribs. For a split second, the words almost caught in her throat — but she swallowed the feeling down immediately.

“...yeah,” she continued after a brief pause. “I’d probably be there.”

Trying to keep the silence from turning awkward, Mutt spoke up.

“Voss knew what she was doing. That woman was tough as nails, and no question about it — her tactical decision-making was some of the best to ever come out of Sergeant School.”

“I think if Voss says hold, then somebody’s still holding.”

Then the radio crackled again.

This time the signal was stronger.

…Mutt?
…if that’s you, you better not be dead yet, you little shit…

Ketter.

Hearing Ketter’s raspy voice and his usual dumb bullshit had never sounded so good until that moment.

Mutt stopped walking.

“Ketter, it’s me. I’m bringing a little backup with me. Where the hell are you?”

A burst of plasma fire erupted from somewhere near the center of the facility, followed by the violent roar of weapons firing in multiple calibers.

Rook glanced at him once, and then turned her rifle back toward the camp.

“You hear that?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“That means they’re either dug in… or pinned down in the center of this goddamn place.”

Both of them moved in unison, pushing toward the center of the palisade.

The area was packed with rapidly assembled Banished structures — jagged walls of scrap metal, barricades, and prefabricated fortifications that completely blocked any direct line of sight to Gauntlet’s position.

The rain kept falling.

Below them, a Banished Brute Choper convoy rolled through the trees on the far side of the valley, red lights blinking through the storm. Somewhere closer, a jackal screamed in that ugly, laughing way they did when they thought the world owed them something.

Rook chambered a round.

Mutt brought up his rifle.

They both started downhill.

And the war on Zeta Halo kept going, because of course it fucking did.

CHAPTER FOUR

BROKEN SIGNALS

The first thing Mutt noticed was that the radio had stopped lying to them.

That alone was bad enough.

The second thing he noticed was that the Banished were still very much alive, which meant the ring was still trying to kill everybody in the most annoying way possible.

He was crouched behind a slab of cracked stone, breathing hard through a mouthful of cold air, while Lieutenant Hana “Rook” Vuković lay half a ridge above him with her sniper rifle braced across a broken support beam. The ground between them was scattered with dead Kig-Yar.

Nearby lay the charred remains of one of those poor Grunts the Banished used like pack mules.

The little bastards were basically walking weapons depots anyway. One good shot to their methane tank and *boom* — they blew apart like a goddamn piñata stuffed with ammo, plasma cells, and scrap metal.

A truly beautiful sight in Mutt’s opinion.

So Mutt didn’t hesitate to move in carefully and scavenge whatever ammunition he could find.

Because right now, he needed a hell of a lot more than a bad attitude if he wanted to put down a few more of those Banished bastards.

Rook’s voice came through comms in that flat, dead-calm tone that always made Mutt feel like she was either already winning or already planning his funeral.

“Movement,” she said. “Two grunts. One jackal. East side.”

Mutt quickly reloaded his MA40 and leaned around the rock he'd taken cover behind, rifle raised and ready to fire.

The Jackal carried a plasma pistol and a full shield barrier.

The bastard moved like he thought he was completely untouchable.

The grunts were behind it, jittering in the mud, one of them dragging a crate that was probably full of ammo or explosives or something equally stupid for a grunt to be trusted with.

He waited for the jackal to cross the open patch of ground.

Rook's shot ripped through the air at supersonic speed.

A .50 caliber sniper round gives off that very specific kind of energy that says, *I don't give a fuck about your cover.*

And the Jackal learned that lesson the hard way.

The round punched straight through the magnetic field of the creature's full-body shield, tore into the right side of its skull, then exited through the left in a spray of blood, bone fragments, and shattered mandibles before slamming hard into the wall of one of those ex-Covenant alloy containers the Banished loved using everywhere.

An absolute masterpiece.

Mutt surged out from cover, dropped the first grunt with a burst to the chest, then kicked the second one so hard it stumbled backward over its own feet and dropped the crate.

The crate split open.

Half a dozen plasma grenades came rolling out from behind the container, clattering across the ground before activating on contact with that iconic hiss and rising electronic whine — the exact sound that had terrified half the Marine Corps… and terrified the poor Grunts forced to use them even more.

Mutt stared at them for half a second and said, "Oh, fuck you."

Rook instantly shouted through the comms, genuine concern breaking through her usually cold tone.

"MOVE, Mutt!"

The explosion hit two seconds later.

The small southern courtyard of the camp vanished beneath a blinding blue-green flash as the blast tore through everything in sight, hurling what remained of the container — along with the shredded remains of the two Grunts and the Jackal — into even smaller chunks of burning meat and twisted metal.

Mutt barely managed to dive away a second before detonation, throwing himself just far enough that the kill zone became merely *non-lethal*.

Even then, the shockwave slammed into him like a boot straight to the chest, knocking the air from his lungs and rattling every bone in his body.

Thank God for standard ODST chest plating, Mutt thought while gasping for breath.

Rook climbed down from the small mound of dirt and scrap metal she'd been using as a firing position as fast as she could.

"Shit, Mutt — you alright?"

Mutt answered between violent coughs, his lungs feeling full of blood, dust, and burned debris.

"Honestly… I've had better days than this," he rasped. "But hey… at least I look a hell of a lot better than those other guys, right?"

Once again, Mutt managed to catch the faintest little smile behind the polarized visor of her helmet.

And somehow, that made him feel a little less fucked up.

At least in terms of his pride — because physically, his body still hurt like absolute hell.

Mutt huffed a laugh despite himself.

For the first time since she'd dropped into his life out of the rain and dead Banished camp, the silence between them felt almost normal.

He keyed the squad channel again.

Nothing but static.

Then, finally:

…Mutt…
…if you can hear this, answer…
…damn it, answer…

The voice was weak and broken up, but unmistakable.

Imani Voss.

Mutt got back to his feet almost instantly — whether from the sheer relief of hearing his commanding officer alive, or from years of psychological conditioning beaten into him by ODST training.

Either way, he genuinely felt happy hearing that someone besides Ketter was still alive out there.

“Sergeant?”

Static.

The only thing he heard through the comm channel was a nonstop storm of swearing, shouted insults, and angry curses.

Which meant, without a doubt, that they were dug in somewhere and still fighting off more Banished troops.

Which meant at least part of Gauntlet was still holding together.

Rook gave him a small pat on the shoulder, brushing dust and dirt off the visor of his helmet before speaking.

“Alright, soldier. Let’s go meet the rest of your squad.”

A faint grin crept into her voice.

“There’s no way they’re crazier than you.”

“COME ON, YOU BASTARD SONS OF BITCHES, IS THAT ALL YOU GOT?! Daddy’s right here waiting to clap those cheeks with your afternoon ass-kicking!”

And yeah… there was absolutely no way those words could’ve come out of anyone’s mouth except Jace Ketter’s.

Rook let out a long sigh, immediately regretting speaking too soon.

Because without a doubt, this guy really did seem completely fucking insane.

Built like a bear and carrying a physique that looked closer to a Brute's than a human's, the lunatic appeared to have absolutely no understanding of basic combat doctrine — namely the very important concept that cover keeps you from getting your brains blown out.

That guy — Ketter — was standing on top of a pile of sandbags like he owned the damn battlefield, carrying an M247H heavy machine gun as if it weighed no more than a feather.

He looked less like an ODST and more like some war-crazed king sitting on his throne in the middle of a firefight.

Fortunately, the man could actually shoot.

The M247H's high-explosive rounds were turning any Banished idiot dumb enough to leave cover into bloody chunks of armor, meat, and flying debris almost instantly.

Every burst from the machine gun ripped through the battlefield like a miniature artillery strike.

"KETTER, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, GET YOUR ASS BACK INTO COVER BEFORE I PERSONALLY DRAG YOU DOWN BY YOUR FUCKING BALLS!" Voss roared.

She used that terrifying tone of voice that instantly told everyone listening two very important things:

she had absolutely done it before…

and she would absolutely do it again.

"Copy that, ma'am. Apparently a man can't even enjoy a little recreational activity under your command," Ketter replied in a tone of genuinely exaggerated sadness.

Right in the middle of that mess of sandbags and improvised armor plating were two more ODSTs.

One of them was the squad medic, currently contemplating whether becoming a combat medic with a team genetically predisposed to collecting as many injuries as humanly possible had really been a better career choice than staying aboard some UNSC station checking hemorrhoids on washed-up high-ranking officers.

Then again…

looking around at the battlefield, the explosions, and the absolute insanity surrounding him — maybe he still wasn't in the worst place imaginable.

The other ODST was the silhouette of a girl who barely still had any of her official armor left, and it was obvious she had modified it herself to better fit her height. MECH — the team's combat technician — was a small girl from one of those outer space colonies where military service was mandatory for every kid unlucky enough to be born there.

She was crouched low like a terrified little field mouse, completely focused on keeping the electronic relay of a captured Banished shield functioning — which, at the moment, was the only thing giving the squad anything resembling actual cover.

Sparks constantly snapped around her hands as she worked, plasma fire splashing against the unstable energy barrier only meters away. One mistake, one overloaded circuit, and the entire shield could collapse and leave them all exposed to a wall of incoming fire.

Mutt was so damn relieved to see almost all of Gauntlet together and alive again…

Well.

Almost all of them.

Voss motioned for both him and Rook to get behind cover.

"Jesus Christ, Mutt, you really took the scenic route seriously."

Mutt cracked a grin beneath his helmet.

"You know me, ma'am. I'm one of those noble souls that appreciates the scenery and likes to take his time doing things."

"And who's your friend supposed to be, Mutt?" Voss asked.

Mutt straightened slightly before answering.

"Designated marksman ROOK… last—"

He paused for a second, carefully choosing the most respectful way possible to say the next part.

"Last surviving member of advance team SABER."

“Damn, girl… if you’re from SABER Team, then you’re probably one dangerous little kitty,” Voss said.

“I’m hoping we can count on those skills of yours to get us out of this goddamn mess.”

Rook wasn’t entirely sure whether the “kitty” comment had been meant as a compliment or not, but Voss’s tone definitely hadn’t sounded sarcastic.

So she answered in her usual cold, professional tone.

“I’m ready to do my job properly, ma’am.”

“Good. Because these goddamn Banished bastards have had us pinned down here with nonstop reinforcements since this morning, and I’m really starting to feel ready to get the hell out of this shithole.”

“Alright then,” Voss said, immediately slipping into that commanding tone that made it sound like the plan was already guaranteed to work.

“Take position in that tower over there and get those big bastards off our backs. We’ll cover you with as much suppressive fire as we can.”

She glanced between Rook and Mutt.

“And since you and Mutt seem to be getting along *so well*, he’s going with you to watch your back. Understood?”

“Ketter, use that steroid-powered leaf blower you call a weapon and lay down covering fire at your two o’clock.”

Voss turned her attention toward Doc Mercer.

“Doc, if your sciatica finally stopped hurting, I’d kindly ask you to use that ancient-ass pistol of yours and start killing a little more than you usually do at the operating table.”

That comment definitely came out harsher than usual — and judging by the deeply offended look on Doc Mercer’s face, he clearly didn’t appreciate it one bit.

“MECH, sweetheart, I know your work’s important, but that shield junk doesn’t mean jack shit right now. So use those tiny little hands for what the ODST Corps picked you for.”

Voss pointed toward the abandoned MA40 beside the sandbags.

“Grab that damn assault rifle and start putting rounds into some Banished for once.”

The way Imani Voss gave orders had always fascinated Mutt.

She sounded like some pissed-off mother yelling at her kids — but in the best possible way.

Beneath all the insults, threats, and screaming, there was something real underneath it: genuine concern for every single one of them.

And somehow, her plans almost always worked.

In her entire career, Voss had never lost a single soldier under her command.

She had this uncanny ability to understand exactly how to use every strength her team possessed to their advantage — even Ketter’s stubborn, borderline suicidal insanity.

Mutt and Rook reached the base of the Banished tower — a roughly twenty-meter-tall structure that offered a perfect view of the entire camp.

Thanks to the squad’s covering fire, they managed to climb surprisingly fast. Plasma bolts and ballistic rounds screamed past the structure while Ketter’s M247H thundered nonstop somewhere below them.

Once they reached the top platform, Rook immediately dropped flat onto her stomach, planting her sniper rifle against the edge of the tower.

“Watch the access point we came through,” she told Mutt while adjusting her scope. “I’d really rather not have some fucking Jackal shoot me in the ass.”

Instinctively, Mutt glanced toward exactly the part of her body she’d just mentioned.

“Damn,” he muttered without thinking.

Rook paused for half a second.

“Damn *what?*”

“Ah… nothing,” Mutt answered immediately.

Rook immediately went to work with that frightening level of precision that seemed almost unnatural.

High-value targets first, obviously.

The Brute carrying one of those shoulder-mounted weapons they called a *Skewer* — a monstrous piece of hardware that fired massive spikes capable of punching through Forerunner armor plating like wet paper.

Rook blew his brains out before he even got the chance to fire.

Next came a Jackal positioned high above them on a rocky hill. The bastard was carrying one of those electric rifles that liked to cook you from the inside before taking your head off a second later.

One shot.

Straight through the throat.

The Jackal collapsed backward, twitching violently as the rifle discharged harmlessly into the sky.

Finally, she spotted a cluster of Jackals holding an almost perfect defensive formation behind overlapping shields.

Almost perfect.

Unfortunately for them, they'd been dumb enough to position themselves right next to an energy coil.

Rook fired once into the glowing cell.

The explosion tore through the formation instantly, launching all three bastards screaming through the air in a storm of shattered shields, burning armor, and alien body parts.

Voss's decision to send Mutt along had turned out to be the right call.

Because one Banished Sangheili bastard had actually managed to climb the tower ladder, clearly intending to slit the enemy sniper's throat before anyone noticed.

Mutt had been so distracted by Rook's insane shooting skills — and, admittedly, by the view of her backside — that he'd almost gotten both of them killed.

Almost.

The alien's footsteps gave him away at the very last second.

Mutt spun around with his MA40 already in hand. The first burst slammed directly into the Elite's shields, the impacts crackling violently across the energy barrier and staggering the alien backward.

Mutt didn't hesitate.

He lunged forward and smashed the Sangheili across the jaw with the rifle stock hard enough to make bone crunch beneath the armor plating.

Before the bastard could recover, Mutt jammed the rifle upward and unloaded a full burst straight into its head.

Blood, shattered mandibles, and fragments of helmet exploded outward, leaving a thick smear of dark alien blood dripping from the upper platform of the tower.

Mutt stood there panting heavily, adrenaline still surging through every nerve in his body.

When he finally looked back toward Rook, she gave him an approving glance through her visor.

"Well, well, soldier," she said. "You actually fight pretty damn well."

The rest of the squad took care of the remaining Banished forces that were still left alive.

Finally, the fighting was over.

Voss opened the squad comm channel.

"Alright, team. Damn good work out there — especially you, kitty. Seriously, you've got one hell of a talent with that thing."

There she goes with the kitty thing again, Rook thought, slightly irritated.

She answered in an even more serious tone than usual.

"Glad to be of service… MA'AM."

Eventually, Rook and Mutt climbed down from the tower to regroup with the rest of the squad.

Mercer was already back to his usual routine — examining the endless collection of injuries Ketter somehow managed to accumulate every single day — while the big idiot barely paid him any attention.

Nearby, Voss was discussing navigation data with MECH over the glowing display of her TAC-PAD, both of them studying routes and terrain markers while smoke from the battlefield still drifted through the ruined camp.

When Mutt approached Voss, she grabbed his shoulder with a firm squeeze that genuinely caught him off guard.

“Damn it, Alvarez… I’m really glad you’re still with us.”

Alvarez… he thought.

Voss only ever called him by his last name when the hardened military commander dropped for a moment and that strangely maternal side of her came through instead.

Mutt smiled beneath his helmet.

“It’s good to finally have Gauntlet back together again, ma’am.”

Almost immediately after saying it, Mutt froze.

“...Where the hell is NEWBIE?”

Voss answered with a troubled tone in her voice.

“Truth is… I don’t know. The kid had the same bad luck you did crossing through that electromagnetic field during deployment.”

The drop pod I saw spiraling away next to mine… Mutt realized.

“The last known coordinates from his drop pod placed him even farther off-course than you were,” MECH added.

“There’s no way in hell I can get an exact position for him right now, but I intercepted some Banished comm traffic talking about prisoners — several Marines and one ODST being transported to a command outpost on the far side of the lake we crossed earlier.”

A Banished command outpost was a completely different beast compared to anything they’d fought so far.

Fortified. Heavily defended. Packed with dozens of hostiles of every kind imaginable.

It was the sort of place none of them were truly equipped to assault head-on.

After all, six ODSTs were *not* six Spartans. Not even fucking close.

Hell, even the big bastard himself — the Master Chief — looked like he had a rough time whenever he stormed fortifications like those.

But if there was even the slightest chance one of their own was still alive in there…

then the UNSC Marines and the ODST Corps had a habit of showing exactly why that strange brotherhood between them existed in the first place.

CHAPTER FIVE

RED FORTRESS

Reaching the Banished command outpost wasn't exactly difficult.

Following the trails left by Banished vehicles, the thick smoke in the air, the stench of alien bodies, and that horrifying smell of burned flesh was… easy.

But actually seeing the damn structure was something else entirely.

The sight alone was enough to crush everyone's morale.

A massive fortification — almost medieval in design — rose from the landscape like a gigantic red scar. Towering walls of Banished metal and salvaged plating surrounded the compound, standing in the middle of scorched earth and forests reduced to blackened skeletons.

The entire place looked less like a military outpost…

and more like a brutal war fortress built by something that genuinely enjoyed slaughter.

"Well…" Ketter muttered while staring at the fortress.

"We are *seriously* fucking screwed, aren't we?"

Voss answered without taking her eyes off the fortress.

"Well, yes. But kindly keep that mouth of yours shut for a minute, please."

"Kitty, tell me what you see from up there."

Kitty again.

Goddamn it, the nickname was really starting to piss Rook off.

She kept scanning the fortress through her scope before answering in a dry

tone.

“Just a whole lot of bad guys with even worse intentions as far as the eye can see.”

Rook said from the slope of towering artificial Forerunner structures jutting out from the side of the landscape like the exposed bones of some ancient machine god.

“Any way inside?” Mutt asked over Rook’s comm channel.

“Just one gigantic front gate where all the Banished vehicle traffic goes through,” Rook replied while scanning the fortress.

She paused for a second before adding dryly,

“Though if your plan is some kind of dramatic entrance… it would look pretty spectacular.”

“Goddamn it…” Voss muttered to herself.

“We need to find a way into that place without getting ourselves blown to pieces.”

“I say we blow the fucking front gate wide open, storm in there, and kill every last one of those bastards who are honestly just begging for someone to hit them so hard up the ass they won’t know how to walk for a week.”

Wise words from Ketter, as always.

“Sometimes you make me question human anatomy, son,” Doc Mercer added dryly.

“I honestly can’t tell whether you think with your ass… or if you were simply born without a brain.”

Voss simply rolled her eyes in annoyance — partly because of Ketter’s idiotic ideas, and partly because she was far too used to hearing them by now.

“MECH, please give me something that sounds like it came from somebody with actual gray matter inside their skull. Have you found anything in the comm traffic or on that little tablet you’re always carrying that’s actually useful?”

“Still working on it, ma’am,” MECH replied while frantically typing across her TAC-PAD.

“Right now I’m trying to hack into the fortress data systems and see if I can find another way inside.”

Suddenly, Rook’s voice cut through the squad comm channel.

“Shit… ma’am, you might wanna come take a look at this.”

Right in the middle of the central courtyard, a group of Brutes were raising some kind of structure while laughing among themselves.

A rack of mangled human armor plates hanging on hooks like trophies.

And in the center, a pole.

Not a flagpole.

Something worse.

A Marine helmet had been bolted to the top of it, visor cracked in half, the inside still dark with dried blood.

“Fucking sadistic sons of bitches…” Voss muttered in a tone filled with pure disgust.

Tucked farther back behind the main barricade was a rough interrogator’s area. Some kind of half-open shelter thrown together from canvas, armor plates, and ruined UNSC deck plating. Banished guards moved in and out of the shadows with the lazy confidence of people who thought the prisoners were already broken.

A Brute stood at the edge of the enclosure, massive even by Banished standards, one hand on a Mangler and the other on a chain tether running into the tent.

He wasn’t the leader.

That was immediately obvious.

The leader was inside the shelter.

Rook shifted her scope.

Mutt heard her inhale once, very carefully.

Then she said, “Oh, fuck me.”

Voss snapped her head toward her. “What?”

Rook didn’t move.

“There’s an Elite.”

That got everybody’s attention.

Mutt zoomed in with his visor optics.

At first he only saw a flash of color in the tent shadow.

Then the figure stepped out.

An Elite.

Red armor.

Energy sword.

Not just any Zealot from the look of it either. This one carried itself like it knew the camp belonged to it. Like every grunt and Brute around it existed to make sure its boots never got dirty unless it wanted them that way.

The sword in its right hand hissed bright blue-white, throwing cold light across the shelter wall and turning the rain into glittering lines.

The crimson-armored Elite barked an order at the Brutes who had been mounting the helmets of fallen Marines onto the structure, and their laughter vanished instantly.

The massive aliens immediately scrambled back inside one of the nearby facilities like obedient attack dogs responding to their master’s command.

Mutt felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

“That’s gotta be the leader,” Mutt said quietly to Rook.

“Definitely,” she replied while keeping the Elite centered in her scope. “I’ve never seen armor like that before. That bastard’s definitely a big fish.”

Rook kept scanning the compound through her scope until something suddenly made her stomach twist violently.

“Goddamn it…” she muttered.

“They’re torturing a group of Marines inside the structure at the far end of

the compound."

Voss immediately raised the binocular optics integrated into her helmet and adjusted the zoom.

"Transmit the position to me. Now," she ordered sharply.

Come on, kid… stay alive, Voss thought to herself while scanning the compound through her optics.

Then finally — in the corner of her vision — she caught the faint reflection of ODST armor.

An unmistakable silhouette shoved against the far wall of the structure.

It was the newest member of the squad.

Newbie.

Soren Bale was on his knees in the mud near the edge of the shelter, wrists bound behind him with glowing restraints, helmet missing, face pale as paper even from here. His eyes were wide and unfocused, like he'd already spent the last few hours trying to decide whether he was awake or just having the worst dream in history.

A Banished guard shoved him forward with the butt of a rifle.

Bale stumbled.

Didn't fall.

Didn't cry, either.

That alone was almost enough to make Voss proud of the kid.

At that moment, Mutt also raised his binocular optics and locked them into his helmet interface, feeding in the coordinates Rook had just transmitted so he could see the situation with his own eyes.

A pair of Marines were kneeling beside him, hands bound, armor stripped in places, one of them bleeding from the scalp so badly the rain had turned his face into red streaks. Another was slumped over like he couldn't hold his own spine up anymore. The Banished had them arranged in a half-circle around a portable light rig, like they were items in an ugly fucking performance.

The Elite stepped in front of them.

Mutt couldn't hear the words.

Didn't need to.

He'd seen enough interrogations to know the shape of one by the way the victims held themselves.

The elite leaned down toward Bale.

Newbie flinched hard enough to make the chain restraints jingle.

The Sangheili straightened and paced slowly in front of the prisoners, sword humming near the mud.

Voss watched through the visor for a long second.

Then she said, "They're alive."

Doc Mercer came up beside her and looked through the same gap in the trees.

"Pretty fucked up… but still alive," the old doctor muttered, sounding like he already knew exactly how much work those Marines — and the kid — were going to give him once they got them back.

Fuck… how the hell are we supposed to get him out of there? Mutt thought to himself.

Ketter cursed under his breath.

"Goddamn it, kid… how the fuck did you manage to get yourself all the way into the deepest part of that shithole?"

Mech was already scanning the camp's outer defenses.

"There are sentries on the ridge, two on the left, one on a high platform. Power cable runs into a shielded relay box in back. If I can get close, maybe I can—"

"No," Voss said.

Mech looked up. "No?"

"Not yet," Voss said firmly.

"We wait until nightfall. If we want even the slightest chance of getting out

of here alive, we're gonna need every advantage we can get."

She knew that meant the poor kid would suffer longer at the hands of the Banished.

But the alternative was risking the entire squad getting slaughtered alongside him.

Ketter stared at the camp, visibly fighting the urge to charge in and hit everything until the problem became a pile of red mist.

"That little shit's down there."

"We know," Voss said.

"And those Marines—"

"We know."

"And that asshole with the glowstick sword—"

"We know," Voss snapped. "We fucking know."

Ketter stayed quiet for a moment because he knew Voss was just as furious about the whole situation as he was.

Finally, he spoke in a much calmer tone.

"Alright, ma'am. We'll do it your way."

He adjusted the massive machine gun hanging from his shoulder and gave a small nod.

"You're the boss."

Rook finally spoke up over the squad-wide comm channel.

"Alright, ma'am… and once night falls, how exactly are we supposed to get inside that fortress without being seen?"

"We don't," Voss finally answered.

"At least… not all of us do."

As she said it, her eyes locked directly onto Mutt.

Mutt knew exactly what Imani Voss was thinking at that moment.

After all, there was a reason she had personally recruited him during the early days of Gauntlet.

Truth was, Mutt didn't really stand out in any one field the way the rest of the squad did.

Voss was the unquestionable backbone of the team — unbreakable under pressure and born to lead.

MECH was the squad's little genius.

Doc Mercer was a walking miracle when it came to combat medicine.

Even the lunatic Ketter had his place. The man was basically a mountain of muscle with a mouth way too fucking big for his own good… but damn it, he had only failed the psychological evaluation for the Spartan Program by a razor-thin margin.

And Rook?

Without question, she was the deadliest unaugmented long-range shooter currently serving in the entire ODST Corps.

So why Mutt?

Simple.

The man had secrets.

And removing the black ink from an ONI file took a hell of a lot of work.

But Imani Voss had a talent for finding useful people in the ugliest places imaginable.

MATEO ALVAREZ
DESIGNATION: ONI HELLHOUNDS INFILTRATION AND ESPIONAGE UNIT.
DISCHARGED WITHOUT HONORS AFTER REFUSING TO COMPLETE THE EXECUTION OF AN ENTIRE INSURRECTIONIST OFFICIAL'S FAMILY IN THE OUTER COLONIES.

Yeah.

Their beloved mutt — the stray dog of the squad — was the kind of man capable of crawling into a hole in the dark and dismantling an entire regime literally overnight.

And that was exactly what made him perfect for this job.

It only took Mutt a second to realize exactly what Voss had in mind before he finally let out a tired sigh.

“Fuck… alright, Imani. But next time, *you’re* paying the entire damn bar tab when we get out of this alive.”

Mutt stared at the fortress for a long moment, committing every turn, every guard position, every patrol route, and every single step leading toward the loading bay where Newbie was being held captive to memory.

He did it almost like a prayer.

Years of ONI indoctrination were the kind of thing a man never truly forgot.

Even if the things Mutt had done before joining Gauntlet were exactly the memories he wished the hardest to erase.

Eventually, Voss and MECH walked over to him.

MECH crossed her arms while holographic data flickered across her TAC-PAD.

“Getting inside that fortress was a gigantic pain in the ass, but I managed it… well, as best as I could without blowing up their entire power infrastructure and causing every Banished bastard on the ring to come crashing down on us in five minutes.”

She pointed toward a highlighted route on the display.

“So basically, I got you a temporary blackout and an entry route through a sewer line. You’re welcome,” the girl added sarcastically.

Mutt, however, didn’t find any part of that particularly funny.

Voss gathered the entire squad together and, as always, began delivering what the team lovingly referred to as *the sermon of the day* — or in this case, the night.

“Alright, Gauntlet, we’ve got work to do. That poor bastard Newbie isn’t getting himself outta there alone, so like the wonderful teammates we are, we’re gonna do him the goddamn favor of making him buy the biggest beer tab the UNSC has ever seen.”

She pointed toward each member of the squad one by one.

“You all know your assignments.”

“MECH, I want that blackout window held open as long as possible. I want it looking like those Banished idiots forgot to pay the fucking electric bill.”

“Doc, I need you ready with every medical reserve we’ve got available. Those Marines and our boy are gonna need treatment ASAP.”

Voss turned toward Rook.

“Rook.”

No *kitty*.

By now, everyone understood that meant she was in full serious-mode.

“I want you watching every entrance and exit route. If you hear anything that even remotely sounds like an alarm going off, I want you blowing heads apart until the barrel of that thing melts.”

Finally, her eyes landed on Ketter.

“And Ketter… I’ve got a special job for you. But for now, hold perimeter security and check Mutt’s insertion point.”

Voss, Ketter, and Mutt moved toward the insertion point MECH had marked on their HUDs — glowing blue symbols floating directly across the visors of their helmets.

Insertion point my ass, Mutt thought the second he saw it.

Because what they actually had in front of them was a massive sewage pipe carrying every disgusting piece of waste produced by the fortress.

And holy hell, it smelled exactly like it looked.

Mutt honestly found himself wondering how the fuck the stench was managing to punch through the ODST helmet filters — systems specifically engineered to let soldiers breathe through toxic gas zones and chemical warfare environments.

Yet somehow, the smell of Banished sewage was winning that battle effortlessly.

Still… it was the only entrance they had that didn’t involve immediate suicide.

At worst, he'd just smell like Banished shit for the next few weeks.

Or months.

Honestly, he had no idea anymore.

Mutt swallowed once.

He checked his magazine.

Then checked it again.

Ketter noticed and gave him one side glance.

"You nervous?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Means you're still useful."

"Fuck you."

"That's the spirit man."

Doc Mercer caught up with them at that exact moment and looked straight at Mutt.

"Jesus Christ, son… now you're *literally* in deep shit."

The old medic pointed toward the sewer pipe.

"And for the love of God, check every seal on your armor before you go in there. I don't have jack shit prepared for septic shock."

As always, Mutt couldn't tell if the old man was making a terrible joke or giving an actual medical warning.

Either way, he checked the seals on his armor twice.

"Alright, Doc. Thanks for the warm wishes," Mutt answered dryly.

Mercer grabbed him by the arm before he could turn away.

Reluctantly, the old doctor extended what he'd been holding in his other hand.

An M6C SOCOM pistol.

Along with a pair of heavy magnum magazines.

“Here, kid. This beauty’s gonna be useful for what you’re about to do.”

Mercer hesitated for a second before adding in a quieter tone,

“Just do me one favor and bring her and yourself back in one piece, alright?”

“Yeah, Doc. I will… and thanks.”

This time, both of them meant every word seriously.

Mutt slid a fresh magazine into the M6C SOCOM and gripped the pistol like he was suddenly becoming that same miserable bastard ONI had spent years training him to be.

Only this time… he’d be using those skills to save a friend.

And with that, Mutt disappeared into the darkness of that shit-filled tunnel.

CHAPTER SIX

QUIET WORK

Voss waited until the very last Wraith patrol rolled out of the fortress for its usual route.

She knew fighting the Banished always meant fighting at a disadvantage.

But fighting at a disadvantage *against a tank?*

That was just plain fucking stupid.

So the moment the massive hovering war machine slowly drifted away and disappeared from her line of sight, she felt slightly more confident about sending one good soldier in there to rescue a rookie who had probably pissed himself more times than his bladder could physically handle by now.

“Alright, team,” Voss said over the comms.

“Everyone get into position. We’ve only got one shot to do this right, so stick to the plan…”

She paused for half a second before adding,

“...and tighten those assholes.”

One by one, confirmations came through the encrypted comm channel as every member of the squad reported they were in position.

Ketter was the first to break silence, because of course he was.

“Hold up, boss,” Ketter suddenly said over the comms.

“What the hell was that *wonderful special assignment* you had planned for me anyway?”

“Why the hell didn’t you send me in with Mutt? I could’ve helped him get

inside without making a sound."

Rook let out an involuntary snort through her nose after hearing Ketter say that, unable to stop herself.

Ketter ignored her. "I've got experience in infiltration missions, Sergeant."

"You've got a felony-level inability to shut the fuck up."

"That is not—"

"Shut up, Ketter."

He shut up. Barely.

Voss turned her gaze back toward the Banished fortress.

She knew that red-armored Elite bastard was still somewhere inside.

Just like Newbie.

Just like the captured Marines.

And now… just like Mutt.

But she trusted him.

Deep down, Voss knew he was the only man on this entire godforsaken ring capable of getting those people out alive.

So she finally gave the order.

"Gauntlet… let's do this."

Mutt moved quickly through the endless piles of Banished garbage and sewage, hurrying to reach Newbie — and hurrying even more because the rancid stench crawling through his helmet filters was making him gag harder every time he breathed.

Finally, he found a narrow opening that led directly behind a waste-storage facility.

From there, he had a clear view straight toward the loading bay where Newbie and the captured Marines were being held.

But going in directly from there would've been pure suicide.

Too open.
Too exposed.
Too many lines of fire.

So instead, Mutt stayed low and moved carefully along the walls of the surrounding structures and the outer edges of the fortress itself, slipping through shadows one step at a time without drawing attention.

Just as a patrol of Grunts was about to walk directly in front of him, every light in the entire goddamn fortress suddenly died.

The compound was swallowed by darkness almost instantly, followed by confused shouting in alien voices and the sound of machinery powering down all across the base.

Thank God for that oversized brain of yours, MECH, Mutt thought.

Only a handful of dim red emergency lights now faintly illuminated the Banished fortress.

Everywhere around him came the sound of disorganized troop movement — alien voices cursing, bodies slamming into equipment, weapons clattering against metal walls, and angry snarls echoing through the darkness.

And Mutt loved that sound.

It was pure chaos.

Because no matter how massive an army was, without control and coordination they were nothing more than a bunch of idiots stumbling around in the dark.

Mutt used the moment perfectly, slipping almost imperceptibly toward another storage building before vanishing back into the darkness he was so used to operating in.

Meanwhile, outside the fortress, Imani Voss turned toward Ketter.

“Alright, Ketter. Time for your mission.”

Her tone became unusually serious.

“And I mean it — this one’s actually important.”

“Yes ma’am, absolutely ma’am. Tell me how I can be of service,” Ketter replied immediately.

“You’re going to find us an exit.”

He blinked. “What kind of exit?”

“The kind where, when all hell breaks loose—and it will—you’ve already got something for us pointing the other way.”

Ketter stared down into the valley, then back up at her.

“Wait… you’re seriously sending me shopping for a vehicle while everyone else stays inside that literal fortress of evil?”

“Yes. There’s a small Banished camp about three hundred meters south of here.”

Voss crossed her arms before continuing.

“That should qualify as a *minor inconvenience* for someone like you, don’t you think?”

“That’s assuming I kill all of them before *they* see *me*, right?” Ketter replied in an irritated tone.

“Yes.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“You’ll survive. Probably.”

He looked personally wounded by that.

Rook had been listening to the entire conversation through the comms, and she couldn’t help smiling inside her helmet.

Voss finally let out an annoyed sigh.

“Fine. I’ll tell MECH to cut the power to that camp too, alright?”

“MECH. Can you get me a blind spot in five minutes?”

MECH was already hunched over her TAC-PAD, connected directly into a hacked Banished terminal and working on it before Voss even had the chance to ask.

“Already on it, ma’am. Give me three minutes… assuming their security system is the same usual pile of garbage.”

Doc stood beside her keeping watch while casually commenting,

“It probably is. Most Banished equipment seems more concerned with looking brutal and having as many spikes sticking out of it as possible rather than actually being functional.”

MECH shot him an offended look without taking her eyes off the TAC-PAD.

“Hey, Doc. I don’t disrespect *your* work, do I?”

Doc smiled faintly and answered,

“I’m just calling it like I see it, kid.”

He glanced toward the darkened Banished fortress in the distance before adding,

“But truth is, everyone here knows that without you, half this team would be flat on their asses during this mission.”

“Well, well… an actually positive comment coming from our beloved representative of the fucking retirement home,” Ketter said with a laugh.

That was enough to make everyone on the comm channel let out either a laugh or at least a snort through the nose — even Doc himself.

“Still, let the record show that the first and only positive comment Doc has ever made was specifically to praise the smartest member of the squad,” MECH said proudly.

Voss gave the order, and Ketter took off as fast as his giant Viking-sized body — while carrying that monstrous heavy machine gun — would allow.

Which, to everyone’s surprise and mild concern, was actually *really fucking fast* for a man that big.

Voss shifted her attention back toward the people who weren’t lucky enough to be standing outside joking around like idiots.

She opened the encrypted comm channel directly to Mutt.

“Alvarez, you’ve got your window now. Use it… and get those people the hell out of there.”

Mutt tightened his grip around the M6C SOCOM until his knuckles turned pale beneath the gloves of his armor.

“Understood, ma’am. Over and out.”

Inside the fortress, everything was still complete chaos.

No alarms yet — but the nervousness spreading through the Banished troops had turned the entire compound into a symphony of alien languages Mutt honestly didn’t give a single fuck about understanding.

Except for that massive red-armored bastard.

Mutt could see him clearly now, barking orders at a trembling Jackal who was probably responsible for the fortress power grid.

The poor bastard barely had two seconds to stammer out a response before the Elite sliced his head clean off in a single motion without even bothering to look at him.

The headless body collapsed and spasmed violently on the floor like some grotesque six-foot-tall chicken while dark blood sprayed across the metal walls.

A moment later, two terrified Grunts dragged the corpse out of the structure, both of them looking seconds away from pissing themselves after witnessing what had just happened.

The Elite looked even more intimidating beneath the dim crimson emergency lighting.

The red armor gave him an even more terrifying presence than before, like some executioner stalking through the dark while the entire fortress held its breath around him.

And honestly, that was exactly what the Banished respected most.

Not honor.
Not rank.
Not weapons.

Fear.

The kind of fear you could force into everyone around you.

And that bastard played his role perfectly.

The Elite finally turned away, leaving a pair of Brutes guarding the area where Newbie was being held.

Somehow, Mutt found himself genuinely grateful that he wouldn't have to deal with that monster… at least not yet, he told himself.

Soren Bale Newbie was still on his knees, shoulders slumped, head hanging forward and then jerking back up whenever one of the Banished shoved him. He looked too young for the camp. Too clean under the blood and mud. Like the ring itself was trying to insult him by placing him somewhere so awful.

Mutt swallowed once.

That kid had probably joined Gauntlet thinking the worst part of the war would be the drop.

Poor bastard Newbie had no idea just how ugly the war against the Banished could really get.

But he was definitely learning the hard way now.

Hang in there, kid… just a little longer. I'm close, Mutt told himself quietly.

Mutt moved through the shadows in perfect harmony — the kind of fluid motion that only comes after doing this countless times before.

A pair of Grunts stood outside a small shack.

They became the first targets Mutt dropped with the M6C SOCOM.

Two precise shots straight through the tops of their skulls.

The suppressed weapon barely made more than a soft hiss in the darkness.

In that moment, Mutt completely understood why Doc was so attached to the pistol.

The thing worked.

And it worked *beautifully*.

Weapons like that barely existed anymore — too expensive to manufacture, too demanding to maintain, and honestly far too dangerous in the wrong hands.

But in the hands of an operative like Mutt?

It was like butter on bread.

A second later, another Grunt rounded the corner… and immediately saw the bodies.

Too late.

Mutt crossed the distance in three silent steps, caught the creature under the helmet with his left hand, and drove the combat knife up under the jaw in a fast, hard stab.

The grunt's whole body jerked once.

Mutt caught the Grunt before the little alien could collapse loudly and slowly lowered the body to the ground without making another sound.

He wiped the blade once on the grunt's sleeve.

Not clean.

Just less wet.

A shadow moved farther up the path.

A Kig-Yar sentry, shield in one hand, rifle in the other, apparently in the middle of being a fucking problem.

Mutt drew Doc's SOCOM.

He took a breath.

Squeezed off one suppressed round.

The jackal's shield flickered.

The second round punched through its eye socket and dropped it into the grass without a sound.

Mutt lowered the pistol and kept moving.

The Banished camp ahead flickered with dim red light where the emergency systems were coming back online.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CUTTING OUT

Mutt moved like the darkness itself had personally trained him — which, by ONI standards, was considered perfectly acceptable job qualification.

The Fortress was a thing of bad engineering and worse instincts: scrap walls, scavenged floodlights, suspended cables, ammo crates stacked into firing lanes, and the constant low stink of wet metal, blood, and methane leaking from broken Unggoy gear. The blackout Mech had bought them was already thinning. Emergency lights along the far barricade were blinking back to life in dull red pulses, just enough to turn the camp into a sequence of shadows and half-seen shapes.

Which meant he had seconds before somebody noticed the missing dead.

He hugged the eastern approach, keeping low along the broken spine of Forerunner stone that rose out of the ground like the teeth of some buried machine. Doc Mercer had been right. Silence was worth more than firepower right now.

Doc's SOCOM pistol rode in his grip and Mutt had already decided it was the nicest weapon anybody had ever handed him.

Near the edge of a Banished weapons storage building, two Grunts were arguing over a Needler.

They snarled and squealed at each other in that high-pitched methane-filtered Unggoy dialect Mutt absolutely hated listening to.

Both aliens stood beneath a suspended emergency light bar hanging overhead, its dim crimson glow barely illuminating the scene.

One of them wore Banished armor marked with symbols that probably meant he held some slightly higher rank by Grunt standards.

Not that it meant much.

Throughout the Covenant campaigns, Unggoy had always been treated as disposable cannon fodder, and life under the Banished honestly wasn't much better.

Give the little bastards slightly improved armor and suddenly they started believing they could take on even a Spartan.

Tiny idiots, Mutt thought.

Mutt waited until the earless one turned.

Then he stepped out of the dark, pressed the muzzle under its chin, and fired once.

The suppressed round made a soft, ugly cough.

The grunt's head jerked back. Its knees folded. It went down without ever understanding it had been murdered.

The second grunt blinked once, confused, then reached for its weapon.

Mutt waited for the perfect moment — the exact second both Grunts turned their backs completely while fighting over the Needler.

He raised the M6C SOCOM and aligned the pistol with his field of vision through the visor of his helmet.

The weapon's targeting system practically did most of the work for him anyway.

But old habits were hard to kill.

He squeezed the trigger.

The suppressed round left the barrel with a noise barely louder than an old man coughing.

The lower-ranking Grunt's head snapped backward violently, spraying a trail of glowing fluorescent blue blood across the floor and over the armor of the other alien.

The body collapsed twitching, feet kicking in involuntary spasms.

The second Grunt froze in place, face splattered with neon-blue blood while blinking in complete confusion at what had just happened.

Instinctively, the alien grabbed the Needler and started raising it toward the approximate direction where he'd heard the tiny sound of the silenced shot.

Too late.

Mutt was already on top of him.

He drove his combat knife upward from beneath the alien's jaw straight into the brain.

Mutt held him there, supporting the Grunt's full weight while the body convulsed violently for several seconds before finally going limp.

Only then did he slowly lower the corpse into the muddy ground as quietly as possible.

By now, Mutt already had several kills behind him.

Still quiet.

He moved past the outer barricade and into the blind side of the camp proper.

The prison shelter sat deeper in the basin, tucked behind a stretch of sheet-metal walls bolted onto old Forerunner decking. Banished floodlights, now half-dead from Mech's sabotage, threw long red bars across the rain. A pair of sentries stood on a catwalk overhead, one Kig-Yar and one Brute, both too busy talking to notice the shadow moving below them.

Mutt raised the SOCOM.

The hangar where they were holding the prisoners was finally right in front of him.

The place was a complete dumping ground — broken machinery, empty magazines, stripped-down vehicles, scattered crates, and piles of scrap thrown everywhere without any order whatsoever.

The Banished were not exactly known for maintaining clean inventory systems.

And right at the entrance stood two Brutes doing an absolutely miserable job of guard duty, scratching their asses and spitting on the floor like they didn't have a single concern in the galaxy.

Every infiltrator's wet dream, Mutt thought.

Hidden within the shadows beside a nearby storage building, he raised the SOCOM and steadied the weapon against the structure for support.

He knew he couldn't afford to miss that first shot.

A Brute skull was far tougher than a Grunt's.

More than once, Mutt had put rounds straight into those hairy bastards' heads only to watch them shake it off like someone had tossed fleas at them.

So he took a slow breath.

The moment the sights settled perfectly between the eyes of the Brute on the left, he squeezed the trigger.

The silenced magnum round slammed directly into the Brute's forehead with full force, punching clean through the skull before exploding out the back hard enough to blossom bone, blood, and purple matter across the wall behind him.

The massive body collapsed afterward, dead weight hitting the floor with a dull metallic thud.

By the time the second Brute realized his partner no longer existed on the same plane of reality—

Pap. Pap. Pap.

Three rapid suppressed shots.

All three struck different points across the Brute's head.

The alien's body simply slid down the wall before going still beside his fellow guard.

Rain slowly washed the trails of purple blood away while Mutt stepped silently into the hangar.

The first thing that hit Mutt the moment he stepped inside was the smell.

Burned flesh.
Old blood.
Urine.
Fear.

Human fear.

The odor twisted his stomach instantly.

But the second thing he saw was far worse.

Off to one side of the structure, piled beside heaps of garbage as if they were nothing more than discarded waste themselves, lay a stack of Marine bodies thrown one over another.

Mutt forced himself not to stare too long at the decomposing corpses and limbs twisted into unnatural positions.

He knew exactly the kind of image that became — the kind that burned itself permanently into a man's mind.

And honestly, he already had enough horrific shit living inside his head without adding another memory to the collection.

That was the part nobody ever wanted to admit about war.

You get used to this shit.

Your brain doesn't let you forget it — oh no, not even close — but it does something arguably worse.

It minimizes it.

It takes horrors like this and slowly turns them into something *normal*.

Like you're no longer living through it yourself, just sitting there as a spectator watching some terrible body-horror movie unfold in front of you.

Except it *isn't* a movie.

It's real.

And later, when you finally close your eyes to sleep, those same images come back over and over again in an endless loop, like your own consciousness whispering into your ear:

That happened. You really lived through that.

And the worst part?

It leaves you damaged.
Angry.

Sometimes for the rest of your life.

Mutt slowly walked toward the central section of the building where a tarp had been hastily hung up — a torn sheet of hexagonal synthetic fabric somewhere between plastic and military canvas, ripped apart in several places.

For a brief moment, he hesitated before raising the knife to cut through it.

God… please let them still be alive.

Fuck… kid, you better still be breathing.

Mutt cut the flap with the knife and slipped inside.

It was somehow even darker inside there than it was outside in the fortress itself. lit only by a hanging hard-light lamp suspended from a chain of welded metal. Its pale blue glow made everything look colder, cleaner, and far worse than it was. The floor was mud compacted into something like concrete by boots and blood and repeated use.

And there, in the center of the tent, was the interrogation frame.

Mutt stopped for half a second, and for that half second the whole universe narrowed to a single ugly shape.

It was a Banished worktable built from scavenged UNSC stretcher bars and Forerunner brace plating. Chains hung from it. Restraints. A gravity clamp. Surgical tools laid out with the care of someone who took pride in making bodies talk. There were blood stains everywhere, some fresh, some dark and old enough to have soaked into the decking. A ruined Marine helmet sat in one corner of the tent, visor cracked open and filled with something black that had once been a brain.

One Marine was still strapped to the table.

Another hung from chains overhead, feet barely touching the ground, his body shaking in tiny involuntary jerks.

The third was on the floor in the far corner, curled against a support pole, chest rising and falling in weak, uneven breaths.

Mutt felt his jaw tighten so hard it hurt.

Then he saw him.

Soren Bale was on his knees near the back of the tent, wrists bound behind him with glowing restraint bands. His helmet was gone. One side of his face was swollen purple-black, and there was dried blood in a line from his temple to his jaw. He'd probably end up with a horrible scar afterward. He was staring at the floor like he was trying to make the ground swallow him whole before the Banished got bored enough to do it first.

A Brute stood over him with a shock baton in one hand and a data probe in the other.

The Brute had no armor on its left shoulder. Its chest plates were painted in ash-gray streaks. Its teeth showed every time it spoke, and the expression on its face was not anger.

It was amusement.

Mutt had seen soldiers kill before.

He had seen them do it fast, dirty, and because they had to.

This thing had the posture of a butcher.

It was leaning toward Newbie now, speaking in low Jiralhanae, each word punctuated by the baton tapping against the deck.

Mutt didn't understand all of it.

Mutt could only make out fragments of what the Brute had been saying.

"Where are the rest of your kind?"

"How many weaklings like you are left?"

"Where is the artifact my master seeks?"

The Brute reached down and yanked Bale's head back by the hair.

Newbie made a sound somewhere between a choke and a gasp.

Mutt had finally seen enough of this bastard who had done so much damage to his people.

He shot the Brute in the neck.

The round punched through flesh, chainmail, and whatever passed for a windpipe in a Jiralhanae throat. The thing jerked upright with a wet gargling

bellow and staggered backward, one hand clawing at the wound as blood sprayed over the interrogation frame.

Mutt shot it again.

The second round entered beneath the jaw and came out near the back of the skull.

The Brute dropped like a collapsed building.

Newbie flinched so hard he nearly fell over.

Mutt was already moving.

He crossed the tent in three fast steps, put one hand over Bale's mouth, and cut the restraint bands with the knife.

"Don't make a sound kid," he whispered.

Bale stared at him with eyes too wide to be sane.

Mutt released his mouth.

"Can you walk?"

Newbie nodded once, then immediately shook his head like the motion had confused him.

"Yeah," he whispered, voice raw. "I—yeah."

"Good. Marines?"

Bale pointed weakly toward the frame.

Mutt turned.

The Marine on the stretcher was still conscious. Barely. One eye swollen shut, lips split, and one arm twisted at an angle that told Mutt the Banished had wanted answers more than mobility. The one hanging from the chains had been worked over badly enough that his uniform was soaked through with blood. The Marine on the floor was gone somewhere beyond speech and his arm was bent at a horribly unnatural angle.

Mutt moved to the stretcher first.

The Marine looked at him, dazed.

“You’re real?” the Marine rasped.

“Yeah, buddy…” Mutt muttered quietly.

“Easy now. I’m getting you all out of here.”

Mutt cut the restraints.

The Marine tried to sit up, failed, and made a sound that was part pain, part laughter, part relief.

“Thought I was fucking hallucinating, man… thanks for getting us out of this shit.”

“Not yet,” Mutt said. “You can thank me later.”

He moved to the hanging Marine and started slicing through the chains.

The Marine sagged into his arms the moment he came free. Mutt caught him by the vest before he hit the deck.

That was when he saw the table properly.

Not just blood.

Tools.

A row of pliers. A heated drill. A small curved blade with blackened residue on the edge. Metal hooks. Electrical leads. A cracked canister of something that looked like stimulant foam, except the Banished had stained it red with dried blood and used it like lubricant for pain. There were strips of cloth on the floor, wrapped tight, and teeth marks frozen into them.

The damned Banished weren’t just trying to extract information anymore.

They were torturing people because they enjoyed it.

The Marine on the floor had lifted his head just enough to look at him. His face was swollen, one eye almost shut, but he was alive.

“Alright, Marines, time to get the hell out of here. Anyone who can still hold a weapon, pick one up.”

Mutt looked over the battered prisoners one last time before speaking firmly.

“Stay close to me, and we’re getting out of this place.”

Newbie was already helping the first Marine to his feet, both of them swaying.

“Where’s Doc?” He asked weakly.

“Outside waiting for us,” Mutt answered.

“Damn… I think the old man’s gonna have a lot of work once we get outta here, huh?” the rookie said, forcing a small smile through a face that had been beaten nearly beyond recognition.

Mutt felt a sharp sting of pity for the kid.

He answered with a genuine smile of his own.

“Relax, kid. The old bastard’s gonna patch you up good as new.”

Mutt grabbed the Marine on the floor under one arm and hauled him upright.

The Marine grunted in pain as his twisted arm loosened and fell hanging uselessly at his side.

“Easy, buddy. We’ll get you patched up the second we’re out of here,” Mutt told the Marine in the most reassuring tone he could manage.

He got them moving toward the back of the hangar.

Then the hard-light lamp above them flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Mutt froze instantly.

MECH’s blackout window was running out, and he needed to get those people out of there — *fast*.

The camp had shifted.

That tiny change in rhythm told him everything. Boots moving too fast. Voices going sharp. One of the sentries had seen something. Maybe a body. Maybe the blackout ripple ending. Maybe the way the tarp flap had been cut too cleanly.

He pressed the Marines down behind a crate and moved back to the entrance

just enough to look out through the crack.

A pair of grunts were running across the central lane.

One of them was screaming in Unggoy language.

The other had its plasma pistol pointed toward the entrance where Mutt had killed the guards

Bad.

Very bad.

Then the first alarm blared.

It sounded somewhere in the camp, loud and flat and angry enough to make the hard-light lamp shake in its hook.

Harsh white lights were beginning to flicker back to life across the central sections of the fortress.

Mutt's comm channel cracked alive at once.

"You've been compromised, Mutt!" MECH shouted over the comms in an alarmed voice.

"You've got maybe thirty seconds before they kick me out of the system and seal the main gate with all of you still inside!"

"Alvarez, report in immediately," Voss ordered, her voice sharp with concern.

"Got Bale and three Marines."

A pause. "Alive?"

"Mostly."

"Good enough. Get them out now."

Another voice cut in, sharp with static and gunfire.

Rook.

"Movement on the west ridge. Banished patrols are converging fast."

That meant the fortress had been properly disturbed.

Mutt glanced toward the outside of the hangar.

A Brute carrying a Mangler pistol was standing near the entrance, dragging one of the Grunts who had apparently reported the dead guards.

The little alien hung from the Brute's massive arm like a terrified child being dragged around by an angry parent, squealing and whining the entire time.

The Banished were waking up.

Mutt keyed his own mic. "I'm gonna have to bring them out through the main gate. Our exit route's compromised."

Mutt checked the magazine in the SOCOM before adding,

"Hope to hell you people have a plan ready to get us the fuck outta here."

"I've got your extraction ready, so move your ass already!" Voss barked over the radio.

"What exactly do you mean by *extraction*, Imani?" Mutt asked.

"Ketter found a ride," Voss snapped.

Wait… Ketter actually found us an escape vehicle?"

Just outside the camp, Mutt spotted an old UNSC Razorback waiting for them.

The thing looked like more scrap metal than military vehicle at this point.

Several wheel covers were missing, the entire left-side armor plating had been ripped off long ago, and Ketter's machine gun had been mounted so hastily onto the upper rail support that whoever fired it would practically have to stand on top of the passengers riding in the back compartment.

It was an absolute piece of junk on wheels.

But it worked.

And somehow, it already looked even better with all of Gauntlet standing around it.

"This has got to be a fucking joke," Mutt muttered to himself, letting out a small laugh after seeing their glorious escape vehicle.

“Can you run?”

One of them laughed once through a mouth full of blood.

“No.”

“Then limp fast.”

He shoved the first Marine toward the main exit and ducked out behind him,

One of the Grunts had already wandered inside the hangar, sniffing the air while searching for the prisoners when Mutt suddenly turned with pistol in hand.

He fired three times straight into the alien’s center mass.

At this point, conserving ammunition and trying for clean one-shot kills was officially no longer a priority.

Mutt dragged Bale out into the rain by the shoulder and hauled the nearest Marine after him. The prisoner on the floor couldn’t keep pace, so Mutt hooked him under the arm and half-carried him through the increasingly illuminated fortress.

A shock rifle burst cracked overhead.

Lightning hit against a wall and turned one section into smoking holes.

“Down!” Mutt shouted.

Newbie moved over and helped support the wounded Marine Mutt was carrying beneath his arm.

“I got him, sir! Let’s move!” Newbie said immediately.

Banished troops were moving now from every direction. Grunts shouting. Jackals sprinting into firing positions. A pair of Brutes barreling through the center lane with Ravager launchers raised. Somewhere near the command shelter, a deep, furious voice was roaring orders in Sangheili.

The red Elite had noticed.

Of course he had.

Mutt couldn’t see him yet, but he felt it in the way the fortress had snapped into disciplined violence. The Banished didn’t move like that for random

alarms. They moved like that when someone important had told them to kill every human in sight.

The Marine beside Mutt coughed and spat blood into the mud.

“Not to rush anybody,” he said weakly, “but I’d really like to not die in this hole.”

“That makes two of us,” Mutt said.

He leaned out and fired twice.

One Jackal hit the ground hard enough to break its neck.

The other ducked behind a shield generator, shrieking.

A third shot took the shield out at the edge and punched through the creature’s shoulder. It went down howling.

Then something heavy crashed into the opposite side of the crate line.

Mutt spun. Leaving the wounded Marine in Newbie’s care.

A Brute had charged the position from the flank, one fist wrapped around a Mangler, the other reaching for him like it intended to tear him in half and inspect the pieces later.

Mutt fired the SOCOM into its face.

The first round shattered teeth.

The second round buried itself between the eyes.

The Brute stumbled, stunned more than dead, and brought the Mangler up anyway.

Jesus Christ, these Brutes really do have thick fucking skulls, Mutt thought.

Mutt hit it in the wrist with the knife on the forward motion, drove the blade through tendon and muscle, then shoved the pistol barrel under its jaw and fired.

The creature finally fell.

Newbie stared at him.

“Jesus Christ.”

Mutt reloaded with shaking hands he refused to acknowledge.
“Yeah… that was way too fucking close.”

They got the first Marine across the main gate with Rook covering from the left side of the Razorback. Her rifle cracked twice in the distance and two Banished sentries fell off the east catwalk like broken dolls. Somewhere behind them, Mech had brought the perimeter systems into total collapse; half the lights in the fortress were strobing, the others dead, and the whole place had turned into a red-black maze of blind corners and panic.

“Well… that should keep them disoriented for a little while,” MECH said in a frustrated tone, annoyed she couldn’t do more for the moment.

Mutt finally reached the Razorback with the rest of the wounded Marines and Newbie, where the rest of Gauntlet was already aboard waiting for them.

Ketter sat behind the wheel grinning, driving that pile of scrap metal as if it were some brand-new luxury vehicle fresh off the production line.

“Get in!” he yelled. “Unless you’d rather stay and chat with the locals!”

A shot from a Mangler slammed into the dashboard right beside them, bending the metal inward and instantly destroying the vehicle’s speedometer.

Ketter looked at the sparks.
“Rude son of a bitch…” Ketter muttered.

Mutt shoved Newbie toward the Razorback. The kid almost tripped, caught himself on the side panel, and he threw himself into the rear passenger compartment of the vehicle. The second Marine climbed in after him. Mutt half-lifted the third Marine up and into the rear before ducking under a burst of plasma that hissed through the gate like green rain.

The alarm tower at the center of the camp began screaming.

Now every Banished soldier in sight knew exactly where they were.

And then the ground shook.

A deep, heavy voice rolled through the camp from the command shelter side, amplified by proximity and anger.

Mutt looked up just in time to see the red Elite step out into the rain.

He was a tall, predatory silhouette at the far end of the lane, armor glowing dark crimson under the alarm lights. Water ran off the plates in thin lines.

The energy sword in his hand burned blue-white against the storm, bright enough to make the raindrops around it flash like sparks.

His head turned once toward the shattered interrogation tent. Then toward the bodies in the fortress. Then toward the Razorback with its humans climbing aboard.

The Elite said something in Sangheili.

Every Banished body in sight stiffened.

The Brutes answered with a bark of rage and began pushing forward.

Mutt couldn't understand the words.

He understood the tone.

That wasn't just anger.

It was pure hatred.

That was a commander discovering that something under his control had just been stolen from him.

Ketter slammed the Razorback into gear. "Yeah, I don't like that look!"

"Drive!" Voss shouted.

Ketter floored it.

The Razorback lurched forward, tires spraying mud and water as the mounted gun roared into life. Mutt grabbed the side rail, Newbie clinging to the seat beside him, both Marines half-sprawled in the back and trying not to fall out as the vehicle smashed through the outer lane.

The Elite moved.

Fast.

Faster than any of them had ever seen an Elite move before.

Four massive strides and then a monstrous leap — the kind of movement only possible for an Elite equipped with reinforced augmentation prosthetics in the legs.

The swing of the sword caught the side of the Razorback's tailgate and

carved a bright line through the metal, showering the rain in sparks. Ketter swore and jerked the wheel hard enough to nearly clip a wall.

Banished fire followed them out of the camp in a storm of plasma fire and Brute spike rounds.

The rescue hadn't been silent.

It definitely hadn't been clean.

And holy hell, the extraction had gone completely off-plan.

But they had done it.

A handful of humans had just pulled off something even a Spartan fireteam would've looked at and called too risky to attempt.

And damn… it felt good.

And behind them, the Banished fortress was left looking like some damned alien nightclub — lights flashing everywhere, idiots firing wildly into the darkness at absolutely nothing, and one furious bastard in red armor snarling in rage while executing the Brute who had probably been responsible for perimeter security.

Mutt looked back

The red Elite had stopped at the middle of the fortress, sword lifted, rain hitting the glowing blade and vaporizing before it could touch the core. His fase was unreadable, but the stillness in his posture was worse than rage.

He had seen the humans escape.

He had seen his prisoners taken from him.

The Razorback swerved hard onto a dirt path, bouncing violently across the rough terrain until Mutt finally lost sight of the Elite behind them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROAD TO CONDOR

The Razorback sounded like it was dying.

Which, considering the amount of Banished gunfire it had eaten on the way out of the fortress, was honestly fair.

The stolen vehicle tore through the rain-soaked forests of Zeta Halo with one headlight blown out, half the rear armor hanging loose, and the mounted machine gun smoking hard enough to smell from the front seats. Mud sprayed behind the tires in long black arcs while the suspension screamed every time Ketter hit another crater like he was trying to personally offend gravity.

Mutt sat in the rear beside the rescued Marines with Doc Mercer crouched across from him, working under the flickering interior light of a portable med-lamp strapped to the side rail.

The lamp painted everything pale blue.

Blood looked black under it.

Mercer had one Marine's arm pinned between his knees while he sealed a torn section of flesh with a field cauterizer. The Marine bit down on a combat glove hard enough to shake.

"You move," Mercer muttered calmly, "I stop helping."

The Marine glared at him over the glove with eyes filled with tears from the pain.

Mercer ignored it completely.

Newbie sat farther down the Razorback wrapped in a thermal blanket Mech had thrown over his shoulders. His face still looked wrecked from the interrogation camp. Bruises. Split lip. Blood dried along his jaw. And that

deep gash across his face that left raw flesh exposed beneath the torn skin. He kept staring at his own hands like he wasn't entirely convinced they still belonged to him.

Which, honestly, made sense.

People came back from Banished camps wrong.

Sometimes physically.

Sometimes they simply didn't make it out at all.

Rain hammered against the canopy overhead while Rook sat perched backward in the passenger seat with her sniper rifle across her knees, visor scanning the dark tree line behind them every few seconds.

Still hunting for pursuit.

Still expecting the red Elite to appear out of the forest with a sword and an attitude problem.

Voss was standing awkwardly in the rear compartment, still holding Ketter's machine gun in a position that was absolutely murdering her back.

Nobody talked for a while.

The adrenaline crash had finally started hitting.

That was the dangerous part after long firefights.

Not the shooting.

The silence afterward.

Ketter finally broke it first.

"Good news," he announced.

"The Razorback only smells fifty percent on fire now."

Mech looked up from the pile of scavenged Banished batteries she was rewiring near the rear compartment.

"That's because the engine compartment already burned off everything flammable."

Ketter looked offended.

“See? Team morale. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“My morale died two firefights ago,” Rook said flatly.

“Come on, you all know we could be doing a lot worse,” Ketter said with genuine optimism.

The Razorback hit another bump hard enough to launch everybody half an inch upward.

One of the wounded Marines groaned.

Mutt grabbed the side rail.
“Jesus Christ, Ketter.”

“Oops sorry”

“Slow down before we all die.”

Ketter snorted.
“We’re ODSTs. Dying in a stupid vehicle accident would be embarrassing.”

“That’s the part you’re worried about?”

“Yes.”

“Preferably when I’m old, ridiculously rich, and the owner of one of those Outer Colony beachfront properties with a private shore and every luxury imaginable.”

Mercer finally sealed the Marine’s wound and sat back with a tired sigh.

“There,” he muttered. “Congratulations. Your arm is officially attached again.”

The Marine looked pale enough to haunt buildings.
“That’s your bedside manner Doc?”

“No. My bedside manner is worse.”

“That explains a lot.”

Mercer handed him a stim patch.
“Take that before I reconsider saving you.”

Mutt leaned his head back against the side plating and finally allowed

himself one long breath.

The forest around them rolled past in dark shapes and broken geometry. Zeta Halo looked different at night. Bigger. Older. Like the ring remembered things nobody alive was supposed to know.

Massive Forerunner pillars rose through the trees at impossible angles, half buried beneath moss and rain and alien vines. Hard-light veins glowed faintly beneath the earth in scattered pulses, like the whole thing had a heartbeat buried under the soil.

And somewhere out there behind them, the Banished were hunting.

Especially him.

Mutt looked down at the SOCOM still resting in his lap.

Doc noticed.

“Thanks for the loan, Doc. This old lady really works miracles,” Mutt said, offering the M6C SOCOM back to the old ODST.

Mercer took a moment to think about it before finally answering.

“You know what, son? Keep it.”

He waved the pistol away with one hand.

“People already ask enough questions about why a man in my profession carries a suppressed pistol in the first place.”

The old ODST shrugged.

“I get plenty of weird looks as it is.”

Mutt caught the faintest hint of a smile on Doc Mercer’s face.

“Thanks again, Doc. I promise I’ll take good care of her,” Mutt assured him.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Let’s not get all sentimental over valuable material possessions, alright, son?” Doc replied, immediately trying to bury the moment beneath his usual dry sarcasm.

The Razorback rounded a cliffside trail and finally slowed.

Ahead, partially hidden beneath a collapsed rock shelf and a camouflage tarp

that had once probably belonged to the UNSC before the universe started personally insulting them, sat a downed Pelican.

Its nose was buried in mud.

One engine was gone entirely.

The left wing looked like something gigantic had bitten through it.

But the hull was mostly intact.

Ketter killed the engine.

The sudden silence felt strange after hours of gunfire and screaming machinery.

Rain tapped softly against metal.

Steam hissed from the Razorback's damaged engine block.

Dawn was beginning to break across the horizon.

The darkness of the night was slowly giving way to pale bands of gray and gold, casting long shadows across the battered landscape of the ring.

For the first time in hours, it almost felt like they had made it through the worst of it.

Voss climbed out first.

"Set up a perimeter," She ordered in that unmistakable command voice of hers.

Rook was the second person to climb out of the vehicle.

She immediately adjusted the optics on her sniper rifle and moved toward the highest position available — the wrecked hull of the downed Pelican.

Climbing onto the twisted section of fuselage, she settled into position and began scanning the surrounding terrain through her scope.

From up there, she could watch every likely approach route while the rest of the team secured the area below.

Mutt climbed out of the vehicle, leaving Mercer with the wounded Marines and Newbie in the Razorback's passenger compartment.

For the moment, the old medic had more than enough work waiting for him.

Mech stared at the Pelican like someone discovering religion.

“Oh, thank God.”

Ketter looked at her.
“You religious now?”

“No. I just really missed ammunition.”

That got the closest thing to a genuine laugh the squad had managed all night.

They moved toward the Pelican carefully.

The troop bay door hung half-open.

Inside smelled like burned circuitry, wet steel, and old smoke.

The Pelican had clearly crashed days ago, maybe weeks. Repair foam still crusted sections of the interior walls. One jump seat had blood dried across it in thick black stains. A pilot helmet rested near the cockpit with a clean hole through the visor.

Nobody commented on that.

Dead crews were normal now.

What mattered was the supply racks.

And the supply left a lot to be desired.

They only had a couple of MA40 magazines left, a single fragmentation grenade, and about half a belt of ammunition for Ketter’s M247H.

The heavy machine gun had been practically emptied during the extraction from the fortress.

If the Banished decided to come looking for them now, Gauntlet would be fighting on skill, stubbornness, and sheer bad decisions more than firepower.

“Well, at least we found something to feed my baby,” Ketter said while unmounting the heavy machine gun from the Razorback’s upper rail.

Mech shoved past him immediately.

“Touch nothing until I inventory it.”

“Hey, my baby’s hungry, woman,” Ketter protested, clutching the M247H

Mutt grabbed a fresh MA40 mag and finally reloaded properly for the first time in what felt like years.

The sound alone made him feel less naked.

Click.

Fresh magazine.

Ready again.

God, that felt good.

Newbie sat while Mercer cleaned dried blood from the side of his face with all the warmth of an irritated mechanic servicing broken machinery.

“Jesus, Doc. Not that I’m complaining about being rescued, but is the rough treatment part of the medical procedure?” Newbie asked from the passenger compartment of the Razorback.

Mercer continued examining him with a small penlight, shining it directly into his eyes while completely ignoring the comment.

“You’ve got a concussion, son. Have you had any vomiting or nausea?” Mercer asked, continuing the examination

“Uh… not yet,” Newbie answered nervously.

“Good. Means your brain’s only partially scrambled.”

“Comforting.”

Mercer taped gauze against his temple.
“You’re alive. That’s as comforting as this gets.”

Finally, Voss crouched beside the Razorback and addressed Newbie with an unusually serious tone.

“Bale, it’s damn good to have you back, kid.”

Her expression hardened.

“But tell me something. What the hell did those Banished lunatics want?”

She glanced toward the wounded Marines nearby.

“And why did they leave you and the rest of these Marines looking like this? What was so important that they were willing to put you through all that?”

Bale answered quietly.

“They kept asking questions.”

“About what?”

“At first?”
He swallowed.
“UNSC positions. FOB routes. Supply corridors. Survivors.”

“That’s normal,” Voss said.

“Yeah.”

“But then they stopped caring about that.”

That got everybody’s attention.

Rook, standing guard, tilted her helmet slightly toward him.

Voss stayed perfectly still.
“What did they ask?”

Newbie hesitated.

Like even saying it out loud felt wrong.

“They kept talking about an artifact something called…”
He frowned slightly, remembering.
“…the Forge of Eternity.”

The members of Gauntlet exchanged confused looks with one another.

“The Forge of Eternity?” Voss repeated, frowning.

A long silence followed.

Nobody answered.

Ketter broke it first.

“Well that sounds fucking ominous.”

Mech looked up from the ammo crates.
“That’s not a Banished designation.”

Voss glanced toward her.
“You recognize it?”

“No.”
Mech shook her head slowly.
“But it sounds Forerunner as hell.”

Rook climbed down from her overwatch position and made her way toward Newbie.

“What exactly were they asking?”

Newbie rubbed his wrists unconsciously where the restraints had burned the skin raw.

“They thought the Marines had seen something.”

“Something?” Rook asked.

“I don’t know.”
Newbie’s voice dropped lower.
“They kept saying humanity found the path first. That the UNSC was hiding coordinates.”

Voss’s expression darkened.

“Coordinates to what?”

Newbie laughed weakly.
“That’s the thing.”
He looked up at them.
“I don’t think even the Banished know.”

The rain was finally beginning to let up as the first rays of dawn broke across the horizon.

Mech sat down slowly on one of the empty supply crates.

“The Banished don’t torture people over rumors.”

“No,” Voss agreed quietly. “They torture people over things they’re desperate to find.”

Ketter crossed his arms.
“Great. Ancient alien mystery bullshit. That always ends well.”

Mutt leaned against the Pelican wall while placing a magazine into his vest.

“Did they say who was leading the search?”

Newbie nodded slowly.

“There was an Elite.”

“The red one?” Rook asked immediately.

Bale looked at her.
“You saw him?”

“Unfortunately.”

The kid nodded.
“He was the one asking most of the questions.”

“And he was especially interested in that thing... the Forge,” Newbie said.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat before continuing.

“The way he talked about it was... weird.”

Newbie glanced at the others.

“Not like someone looking for a weapon, or a base, or some piece of Forerunner tech.”

He swallowed.

“It was almost religious.”

“Every time he mentioned the Forge of Eternity, it sounded like he was talking about some kind of sacred place.”

That bastard had control of an entire fortress, with dozens of Banished under his command, including vehicles and heavy weapons.

This could get real fucking dangerous, Mutt thought as he listened to the kid's words.

Newbie had already started trembling uncontrollably.

“Alright, alright. That's enough,” Doc Mercer said, noticing Newbie's uncontrollable shaking.

“Let's try not to give the kid any more mental problems than he already has, shall we?”

Voss stood.

“Alright, Gauntlet,” Voss said, straightening up and turning toward the rest of the team.

“We move out in twenty minutes.”

She pointed toward the wrecked Pelican.

“Scavenge whatever you can from that downed bird. Ammo, medical supplies, fuel—anything useful.”

Her gaze shifted toward the battered Razorback.

“Once we fill the tank on that rolling piece of shit, we're gone.”

“Gone where?” asked one of the rescued Marines weakly.

Voss answered without hesitation.

“FOB CONDOR.”

Ketter grinned immediately.

“Perfect. More opportunities to demonstrate my exceptional driving skills.”

The rest of the team immediately groaned in unison after hearing those words.

Even a few of the wounded Marines managed to look concerned.

MECH disconnected her TAC-PAD from the downed Pelican's terminal.

“Perfect. Maybe at CONDOR I'll finally find a database worth working with.”

She slung the device under one arm and sighed.

“Or at least a circuit board that's still half intact.”

“Assuming CONDOR exists,” Mutt muttered.

Mech looked at him.

“It exists.”

“You sound weirdly confident.”

“That’s because I’ve seen it.”

Everybody turned toward her.

Ketter frowned and looked at her.

“Wait. You've known this since we got out of that damned place?”

He pointed at her TAC-PAD.

“How the hell do you know that?”

“I know, because while the rest of you were busy scratching your asses, I pulled every bit of information I could from the Banished terminal,” MECH said.

“Wonderful, Missy. Any other important information you'd like to share with us right about now?” Voss asked in a tone that sounded far more like a mother scolding her child than a Sergeant addressing a subordinate.

MECH immediately stiffened.

“Uh... no, ma’am.”

She straightened her posture instinctively.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

The sudden confidence she'd been carrying moments ago evaporated almost instantly.

Voss rolled her eyes and was already turning away with an annoyed expression when MECH hurriedly added,

“The good news is I've got a direct route plotted so Ketter doesn't kill us on the way there.”

She flashed a small, nervous grin.

“Hey, don't try to turn *Mom* against me, kid,” Ketter shot back sarcastically.

Two hours later, they reached it.

The Razorback crawled up the final slope just in time before the engine practically ran dry.

The battered vehicle let out a series of awful gurgling noises as if it were actively dying beneath them.

Ketter kept hammering the ignition switch over and over, refusing to let the poor wreck finally give up.

Every few seconds the engine coughed, sputtered, and threatened to stall permanently.

Yet somehow the giant ODST kept bullying it forward through sheer stubbornness.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Ketter muttered at the dashboard.

“Don't you die on me now.”

Fog rolled through the mountains below in pale gray rivers while distant Forerunner towers emitted pulses of light before sending them into space.somewhere beyond the horizon.

And a few meters farther down the hillside, they finally saw FOB CONDOR.

Mutt expected another fortified FOB.

Concrete walls.

Watchtowers.

Turrets.

Instead, he blurted out— “Holy shit.”

Below them, hidden deep inside a valley carved into the side of the ring itself, sat a massive UNSC Condor dropship.

Not crashed.

Not destroyed.

Rebuilt.

The enormous craft rested on reinforced landing struts surrounded by

barricades, ammo stations, sensor towers, camouflage netting, welded armor plating, and defensive gun nests built directly into the hull.

UNSC Marines moved across the top of the wings carrying crates and rifles.

Machine gun emplacements had been mounted where troop rails used to sit.

Portable shields were placed near the lowered cargo bay.

The engines had been converted into auxiliary power systems feeding the entire outpost.

It wasn't just a base.

It was literally a warship converted into a UNSC forward operating base, armed to the teeth and sitting in an incredibly defensible position.

Practically speaking, if any Banished idiot got the brilliant idea of trying to take FOB CONDOR, they would be greeted by a very hot welcome from the Marines' numerous weapons—and even more so from the two GAUSS cannons still mounted in the perfect defensive firing positions of the CONDOR's weapons systems.

Ketter stared down into the valley.

"That…"
He whistled softly.
"That is the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

Mech looked genuinely emotional.
"They turned a Condor into a FOB…"

"No," Rook said quietly from the back of the Razorback.

Everybody looked toward her.

The sniper kept her eyes on the massive grounded aircraft below.

"They turned it into a fortress."

CHAPTER NINE

UNDER THE ARMOR

FOB CONDOR had that unmistakable UNSC smell to it: burnt, stale coffee; engine grease; freshly welded steel; gunpowder smoke; and humanity in all its messy, stubborn glory.

Which meant it smelled more like home than anything Gauntlet had seen in days.

The grounded Condor dominated the valley floor like some prehistoric animal too stubborn to die. Floodlights mounted along the wings cut through the morning fog while Marines moved between barricades carrying ammo crates, fuel canisters, and enough weapons to start a small apocalypse.

The old dropship had scars everywhere.

Hull breaches patched with welded plating.

One of its engines had been gutted open, cables and piping spilling out of the exposed machinery and feeding power to practically the entire UNSC stronghold.

Black scorch marks along the belly from plasma impacts that had nearly gutted the craft at some point.

And still it kept going.

Mutt respected that.

ODSTs trusted broken things that kept fighting.

The rear troop bay had been converted into a mess hall, command center, armory, and medical station all crammed together through sheer military stubbornness. Somebody had welded folding tables directly into the deck plating. Portable heaters glowed in the corners. Marines shuffled between supply stations carrying bowls of ration stew that looked only slightly more

edible than insulation foam.

Ketter took one bite and frowned deeply.

“Damn... This tastes like what the Covenant felt when they lost the war.”

Mech was busy reviewing the data transfer from her TAC-PAD to a portable UNSC terminal that one of CONDOR’s maintenance techs had handed her earlier.
“That’s because you put hot sauce on everything.”

“Hot sauce fixes emotional damage.”

“It clearly didn’t fix your face.”

“Wow.”
Ketter pointed at her with the spoon.
“That was completely uncalled for, kid,”

Rook sat farther down the table silently eating from her own tray while the rest of the squad gradually decompressed around her.

She still wore most of her armor.

Still had the rifle nearby.

She looked like something was wrong with her for feeling even a little safer in that place.

What really made her feel bad about all of it wasn't the safety itself.

It was the fact that she was the only one left from Saber Team who could enjoy that luxury.

The only one who had made it back.

For a brief moment, a shadow crossed her expression, and her usual cold, composed presence seemed just a little heavier and for the first time, genuinely sad.

Voss stood near the command table speaking with another UNSC officer while Doc Mercer looked more exhausted than ever.

The old combat medic had already treated:

- two Marines,

- a shattered shoulder plate,
- Newbie’s concussion,
- one poor bastard with burns down half his back from a plasma near-miss.
- and at least one Marine who somehow managed to shoot himself in the ass during a routine training exercise

Mercer looked exactly as miserable as always.

And somehow, he was still patching up another Marine.

“You done bleeding?” he asked.

“Mostly.”

“Good. Keep pressure on the wound and, for the love of God, stay on that cot before I personally rip those stitches out with a punch.”

“You’re very inspiring, Doc.”

“I know.”

Mutt sat back against the Condor’s interior wall with a fresh ration tray balanced on one knee. Real food by UNSC standards:

- protein mash,
- recycled potatoes,
- synthetic beef strips,
- and coffee strong enough to dissolve paint.

He took a sip and immediately regretted having taste buds.

Across the bay, technicians were working on Gauntlet’s armor.

One Marine welder was repairing the dent in Ketter’s shoulder plate while another patched cracked seal lines in Mutt’s chest armor.

Another poor technician stood nearby with a high-pressure hose, pinching his nose shut and dry-heaving uncontrollably as he tried to remove the smell from the rest of Mutt's armor after his little "expedition" through the sewers.

Mutt snorted through his nose, unable to hide a grin at the sight of it.

Mech hovered nearby like an angry goblin making sure nobody touched her equipment wrong.

“No, no, no,” she snapped at one technician. “If you reroute the relay through that line, the armor’s gonna cook his kidneys.”

The technician blinked.
“…How do you know that?”

“Because I did it once.”

“…To yourself?”

Mech paused.
“That’s not important right now.”

Ketter looked horrified.

“Science requires sacrifice.”

“That explains so many fucking things about you,” Ketter said between enormous bites of synthetic protein fiber ration.

The atmosphere inside CONDOR felt strange after the chaos outside.

Not that it was a bad feeling for a change.

Like the war had loosened its grip for a few precious hours.

Mutt finally noticed Rook had stopped eating.

She was staring at nothing.

Helmet resting beside her.

Her mind was clearly somewhere else, far away from the noise and safety of CONDOR.

He grabbed his tray and moved down beside her.

“You planning to sleep eventually?”

“No.”

“Healthy.”

“Sleep gets people killed.”

“That’s a very ONI answer. And trust me... I know exactly what that's like.”

Rook took another sip of coffee and immediately grimaced.
“Jesus Christ, this coffee tastes like shit,” she said, clearly changing the subject.

“Trust me, the *lemonade* is somehow worse,” Mutt said, trying—and only partially succeeding—to be funny.

“I’ll try not to forget that,” she said, a faint smile appearing on her face.

For a few seconds they sat quietly while mechanics worked nearby and the low hum of CONDOR’s power systems vibrated through the hull.

Then Mutt glanced toward her sniper rifle resting against the wall.

“No offense, but you don't exactly strike me as the kind of person who's naturally cold toward other people...”

Mutt took a sip of the terrible coffee and shrugged.

“Unless they're standing on the other side of that scope, of course.”

“I wasn't. Or at least... I don't remember being this way before.”

Finally, Mutt asked the question he'd been wanting to ask since they met.

“So... how'd you end up on your own?” he said.

That got her attention.

Not angry.

Just distant.

Rook leaned back slightly against the bulkhead and stared toward the open cargo bay where fog rolled through the valley outside.

“My squad got hit near the northern fractures.”

Mutt stayed quiet.

That was usually the trick when talking to a soldier about their emotions.

You didn't push.

You didn't pry.

You just let them decide what to say, what to let go of... and what to bury.

Rook continued after a moment.

“We were acting as the spearhead for what command called a *Strategic Point of Interest*.”

Rook stared into the dark liquid inside her cup.

“The same shit as always.”

A bitter smile crossed her face.

“Something Saber Team had gotten pretty damn used to by then. Being stuffed into our metal coffins and dropped somewhere dangerous to die for whatever shiny thing ONI suddenly decided was *interesting*.”

“But instead, we ran into resistance we weren't expecting...”

Rook paused for a moment.

“And honestly, resistance we had no business trying to handle.”

“They knew we were coming.”

“Not exactly where. Not exactly when.”

“But they knew.”

“And by the time we realized it, we were already walking straight into the kill zone.”

Mutt connected the dots almost immediately.

“That's why you reacted like that when Newbie mentioned the Forge, isn't it?”

He leaned back in the chair.

“That's the place your team died trying to reach.”

“At the time, we didn't know that. At first, we thought we'd just landed at a really bad time in a really shitty place.”

“But then we realized the opposition force was way too interested in that place... and way too prepared.”

Rook's expression darkened.

“They weren't just guarding it.”

“They were waiting.”

She slowly shook her head.

“My guess is they'd already spent days trying to get inside that damn structure before we ever showed up.”

“They cornered us in a corridor full of weird Forerunner structures.”

Rook's eyes were distant now, seeing the memory instead of CONDOR.

“The place was almost completely dark. The only light came from that pale blue bullshit they use in every single one of their goddamn ruins.”

She took a slow breath.

“And the Banished just kept coming.”

“Brutes. Elites. Jackals. Skirmishers.”

“Wave after wave after wave.”

Her voice remained calm, but only because she'd already relived that moment a thousand times.

“We kept getting pushed back.”

“We kept running out of ammunition.”

“And we kept getting fewer.”

Silence lingered for a moment.

“Until eventually my commanding officer made a decision.”

Her hand tightened around the cup.

“He ordered me to get the hell out of there.”

“Said somebody had to survive long enough to warn the next team about what was waiting inside.”

Mutt knew exactly what that felt like.

He'd been on both sides of that same situation more times than he cared to remember during his years running operations for ONI.

Darkness.

Confusion.

Large silhouettes moving through the shadows.

Never quite knowing whether they were yours or theirs until it was already too late.

“Do you know if anyone else made it out?”

Mutt asked quietly, doing his best to sound as respectful as possible.

Rook was quiet for several seconds.

Then:
“Just me.”

Mutt looked at her more carefully then.

Not the armor.

Not the sniper rifle.

Her.

The way she held tension in her shoulders like it had become part of her skeleton. The exhaustion buried behind the coldness. The tiny scar near her jawline half-hidden beneath grime and fading camouflage paint.

She had been alone a long time.

Too long.

“Damn...”

Mutt lowered his gaze for a moment.

“I had no idea it had been that bad.”

He shook his head slowly.

“I’m really sorry.”

Rook shrugged both shoulders.

“It's the job, you know.”

A faint, tired smile crossed her face.

“Nobody puts on ODST armor expecting a happy ending.”

She stared into her coffee for a moment.

“Sometimes you're the one who makes it back.”

“Sometimes you're the reason somebody else does.”

Her eyes drifted toward the busy interior of CONDOR.

“That's just how it goes.”

“Besides, after that I ran into you.”

For the first time, a hint of amusement appeared in Rook's voice.

“You and this entire collection of lunatics you call a team.”

She glanced toward Ketter, who was currently Stuffing his face with a protein ration somewhere across the room.

“They took me into Gauntlet without even thinking twice.”

Another pause.

“Now that I think about it...”

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“None of you ever actually asked.”

For the first time, Hana "Rook" Vuković was actually looking directly at him instead of speaking to empty space like she usually did.

Mutt blinked.

And just sat there staring for a few seconds without saying a word, completely caught off guard.

For a moment, his brain seemed to have suffered a catastrophic systems failure.

Blonde hair fell loose around her shoulders, flattened slightly from the helmet seals. Not bright gold — darker than that, dirty battlefield blonde with strands cut unevenly where she'd probably hacked pieces off herself in the field. Sharp cheekbones. Pale skin under the grime. Gray-blue eyes that looked permanently tired in a way sleep probably couldn't fix anymore.

And yeah.

She was gorgeous.

Not soft-pretty.

Not polished.

The kind of attractive that survived disasters.

The kind that looked dangerous even sitting still.

Mutt realized he had been staring about half a second too long.

Rook noticed immediately.

One eyebrow lifted slightly.

"You okay there?"

"Yep."
He cleared his throat.
"I was just thinking about something," Mutt said, trying to sound as normal as humanly possible.

That got the faintest hint of amusement from her.

Across the compartment, Ketter stared openly.

"No fucking way."

Mech looked up from her TAC-PAD.

Even she couldn't ignore Ketter's tone of voice during that last sentence.
"What?"

Ketter elbowed her in the side and, with absolutely zero regard for subtlety, said in a voice far too loud:

"She's hot."

The entire compartment went silent for one dangerous second.

Rook stared at him.

Voss slowly pinched the bridge of her nose.

Mercer didn't even bother looking up to see the reaction around the room.

He peeled off a pair of blood-stained sterile gloves and tossed them into a disposal bin.

“I’m begging the universe to kill him.”

Ketter raised both hands defensively.
“What? We were all thinking it.”

“No,” said Mech.

“Yes,” said one wounded Marine immediately.

“Traitor,” Mech muttered.

Ketter looked at Mutt.
“You especially were thinking it.”

Mutt nearly choked on terrible UNSC coffee.

“Jesus Christ man.”

Rook leaned back in her seat, visibly reconsidering every life decision that had brought her into this room.

“You know,” she said dryly, “somehow this is the worst thing that’s happened to me all week.”

That finally broke the tension.

Even Doc laughed quietly at that.

Ketter pointed a thumb at himself with all the confidence of a man completely disconnected from reality.

“What do you think, boss?”

He flashed Voss a proud grin.

“You think she likes me?”

Voss dragged a hand down her face as if physically exhausted by the conversation.

“Any woman would rather throw herself off a cliff than end up with an idiot like you, Ketter.”

“Then she has no idea what she's missing,” Ketter declared.

Without a shred of shame, he sat down and immediately started eating somebody else's ration.

Wearing a satisfied grin the entire time.

The humor faded naturally after that, settling into the kind of exhausted quiet soldiers shared when they finally stopped long enough to remember they were human.

Outside CONDOR, it was starting to rain again.

Across Installation 07, the native wildlife sought shelter from the first drops falling onto the emerald grasslands. Strange alien birds perched atop the trees, screeching and squabbling over the best branches before the storm settled in.

Nightfall was beginning to descend over the northern reaches of the ring.

That strange four-hour day-and-night cycle that always felt wrong.

Artificial.

Unnatural.

Like reality itself had been assembled by someone who understood the concept of a world, but had never actually lived on one.

Everything moved too fast on Zeta Halo.

Mornings came and went in the blink of an eye.

Sunsets felt rushed.

Nights never lasted long enough.

The cycle pushed everyone into a constant hurry, as if the ring itself was always urging its inhabitants to move faster, fight harder, and get on with whatever business had brought them there.

And as the dark clouds rolled over CONDOR and the rain began drumming against steel and armor plating, the fortress settled into that rare moment of calm that only soldiers could truly appreciate.

The kind that never lasted nearly long enough.

At the far end of the bay, Newbie had finally fallen asleep sitting upright against a crate with a thermal blanket wrapped around him.

Mercer draped another blanket over him without a word.

Then the medic looked toward Mutt and Rook.

“Do either of you plan on getting some sleep?” Doc Mercer asked.

“Not yet,” they both answered at exactly the same time.

Mercer collapsed onto a folding cot beside the medical bay, looking as if the war had personally beaten him with a crowbar.

“Good night, then.”

He pulled a blanket over himself without even bothering to remove his boots.

“And don't wake me up.”

A pause.

“Future head trauma team.”

The insult hung in the air for a second.

“Was he talking about us?” Mutt asked.

“Almost certainly,” Rook replied.

Ketter raised a hand.
“Can I join team?”

“No,” Rook said. “You’re already damaged.”

That earned another round of tired laughter.

And beyond CONDOR, farther than the muddy expanse carved out by the endless passage of patrol Mongoose ATVs, farther than the Warthogs used to maintain contact with nearby FOBs, and farther still than the battered Razorback that now sat completely motionless and useless, waiting to be

stripped for parts—

As if it were finally resting after carrying all of Gauntlet and a handful of Marines to safety.

Beyond even that.

Beyond where the trees had shrunk into little more than pencil-thin silhouettes against the rain.

Something was watching them.

Watching the fortress.

Watching the soldiers.

Watching the lights shining through the storm.

Black eyes filled with hatred stared through a magnified scope covered in red targeting lines and glowing symbols.

Motionless.

Silent.

Patient.

The rain dripped from dark crimson armor without drawing even the slightest reaction.

A predator waiting for the perfect moment.

A hunter studying its prey.

And somewhere behind that visor, Va 'Rukamee watched the humans laugh, eat, argue, and enjoy a brief moment of peace.

He knew it would not last.

It never did.

“The Forge of Eternity will awaken soon,” the Elite said.

Rain hissed against the armor plating.

“And when it does…”
His grip tightened around the hilt of the sword.

“…this ring will belong to the worthy.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE RED DEATH

ONI ARCHIVE // EXCERPT

SOURCE: Survivor Debriefing
VESSEL: UNSC Frigate IVORY PLATE
STATUS: Sole Confirmed Survivor
SUBJECT: Marine First Class [REDACTED]
DATE: [REDACTED]

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

[OBSERVATION: Subject displays visible signs of severe combat stress. Involuntary tremors observed in both hands. Elevated heart rate. Difficulty maintaining eye contact.]

SUBJECT: "Damn it, I've told you people a million times."

[REDACTED - ONI INTERVIEWER SPEAKING]

SUBJECT: "Fine. One last time."

"We were operating in hostile territory. The Captain knew that. Everybody aboard knew that. I was on routine patrol duty. Same boring crap every Marine pulls on a ship that's been drifting through space for ten damn years."

[OBSERVATION: Subject laughs briefly. Laughter appears involuntary.]

SUBJECT: "You find ways to waste time inside those steel cans or you lose your mind."

"But nothing showed up. Nothing."

"No proximity contacts. No infrared signatures. No sensor anomalies."

"Just darkness."

"By the time we realized we were under attack, it was already too late."

"Sergeant Martinez was still issuing engagement orders when the entire southern section of the ship stopped responding."

"De Soto. Linares. Bjornson. Me."

"That was all that remained between... whatever was aboard that ship... and the command bridge."

"The thing is..."

"We never actually understood what happened."

"The lights across the entire vessel died."

"Every last one of them."

"Whoever boarded us wanted us scared first."

"The old man, Bjornson, was the first to go."

"Then Linares."

"Then De Soto."

"Damn it..."

"He was only a few meters away from me."

"I couldn't even track what I was looking at."

[OBSERVATION: Subject enters visible distress state. Breathing irregular.]

SUBJECT: "I still see those black eyes."

"And that red armor."

"Jesus Christ..."

"You people don't understand."

"I couldn't do anything."

"I couldn't stop it."

END TRANSCRIPT

ONI PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW:

Subject exhibits symptoms consistent with severe combat-related psychological trauma. Recurring visual flashbacks, survivor's guilt, sleep disturbances, and elevated anxiety responses observed during interview process.

RECOMMENDATION:
Immediate removal from active combat duty.
Mandatory psychiatric treatment.
Further investigation into unidentified hostile boarding force referenced throughout testimony.

OFFICIAL MEDICAL STATUS: Discharged from active service and transferred to Blue Valley Military Psychiatric Hospital.

ACTUAL CURRENT STATUS: CLASSIFIED.

FILE ENDS.

Before the Banished.

Before Atriox.

Before the Covenant burned itself to ash around the corpse of its own lies—

he had already been dangerous.

His name was **Va’Rukamee**.

Among the Sangheili, the name carried weight the same way old scars carried memory. Warriors spoke it carefully. Human survivors remembered it with shaking hands and broken voices. Even now, years after the Covenant War had ended, ONI threat archives still carried fragmented reports.

Shipmaster Va’Rukamee.

Executioner of the Third Glassing Fleet.

Butchers rarely became legends among the Sangheili.

Warriors did.

And Va’Rukamee had once been one of the finest swordsmen in the Covenant military machine.

Long before humanity ever touched the first Halo, he had fought in campaigns against Kig-Yar pirate states, the Unggoy rebellions, and insurrectionist colonies swallowed by Covenant expansion. He had earned command not through politics or lineage, but through direct violence so efficient it bordered in religious art.

That was what made him terrifying.

He was not a brute.

Not reckless.

Va'Rukamee killed with discipline.

Coldly.

There were stories, too. The kind that spread from one Marine to another when everyone was bored out of their minds—or when psychologically traumatizing your buddies counted as "team bonding" among soldiers.

Stories of colonies burned.

Stories of interrogation pits where prisoners disappeared.

Most of those stories were probably exaggerated.

Somehow, that made the truth worse.

Because the truth was measurable.

Over four hundred confirmed human kills during the Covenant War.

Civilian evacuation routes cut apart during glassing operations near the Outer Colonies.

A Spartan-III fireteam listed MIA after boarding one of his destroyers near the end of the war.

ONI never recovered the bodies.

Va'Rukamee had.

And unlike many Covenant commanders, he remembered humanity clearly.

He remembered humanity not for the kind of hatred the Prophets had reserved for them out of wounded pride, nor for the Banished's contempt

toward what they called *weak flesh*.

No.

He remembered them because they were good prey.

The kind that didn't run and die quietly.

The kind he liked.

The kind that bared its teeth when cornered.

To Rukamee, that was humanity.

A worthy hunt.

A dangerous one.

And, in its own way... one worthy of respect.

But there was one particular prey, however, that had proven especially irritating to hunt.

And there it was.

More than ten kilometers away from CONDOR.

Watching.
Analyzing.
Waiting.

Rain ran down the surface of the ancient armor he had earned during the Covenant's campaigns of annihilation.

Even Atriox's closest lieutenants had long since discarded their old Covenant armor out of hatred for the empire that had betrayed them.

But Rukamee had kept his.

Not out of sentiment.

Not out of nostalgia.

And certainly not for something as ridiculous as attachment.

He kept it because of what it represented.

Entire fields of graves.

Worlds reduced to ashes.

Countless enemies broken beneath his blade.

And among the Banished, accomplishments like that earned respect.

The kind of respect that didn't need to be spoken aloud.

The kind written in blood.

But now his own fortress on Installation 07 had been infiltrated.

Violated.

His prisoners had been stolen from him.

Nearly a dozen of his warriors had died the same way he himself had made humanity suffer so many times before—without ever realizing death was upon them.

And that, more than anything else, was irritating.

Profoundly.

Irritating.

Not that he cared about his soldiers.

To Rukamee, they were little more than numbers on a tally board.

Assets.
Tools assigned a purpose.

And if they failed to fulfill that purpose, he was more than willing to personally "relieve them of their duties."

No, the deaths themselves meant nothing to him.

What bothered him was the message behind them.

Someone had slipped through his fortress, gutted part of his garrison, stolen his prisoners, and walked away alive.

And that was humiliating, and Rukamee did not tolerate humiliation.

The Banished responded to humiliation with overwhelming force.

Atriox had taught them that.

Va'Rukamee approved of the philosophy.

Mostly.

The Shipmaster stood motionless near the edge of the cliff with his hands clasped behind his back, energy sword deactivated at his hip.

A Brute Chieftain approached carefully from behind him, armored boots grinding against volcanic stone. Massive. Scarred. One eye replaced by a crude cybernetic implant glowing dull orange beneath heavy bone plating.

His name was Gorvadam.

And despite being nearly three times heavier than the Sangheili, the Brute still stopped several meters short of Va'Rukamee's back.

Even Banished learned fear eventually.

"The lower-ranking troops report that the prisoners and your... prey are most likely inside the human fortress" Gorvadam said.

Va'Rukamee did not turn.

"I am aware."

"The latest count indicates that more than six Jiralhanae warriors perished during the confrontation, along with a handful of the lesser species," the Brute added with a low growl.

"Then your so-called warriors leave much to be desired," Rukamee added, his voice carrying a hint of contempt.

The Brute's jaw tightened slightly.

Banished culture tolerated many things.

Insults between species were practically a second language.

But Va'Rukamee carried himself differently than most Sangheili inside Atriox's forces. He lacked the loudness of Jiralhanae commanders. Lacked their theatrical cruelty. Brutes shattered bones because they enjoyed noise.

Va’Rukamee preferred silence.

That unsettled them more.

“The humans now shelter at the grounded vessel,” Gorvadam continued carefully. “We can attack before dawn.”

Still the Shipmaster remained silent.

Rain hissed softly across his armor.

Then finally:

“No.”

The Brute frowned.
“No?”

Va’Rukamee slowly turned toward him.

“One does not enter a prey's den to hunt.”

He watched the distant human outpost for a moment before continuing.

“One waits for the prey to leave.”

“To relax.”

“To grow comfortable.”

“And in this case…”

A predatory smile spread across his mandibles.

“To lead us exactly where we want it to.”

The Brute crossed his arms.
“And the Forge?”

At that word, something changed in the Shipmaster’s posture.

Dangerous.

The kind of stillness predators reached before violence.

“Do you doubt my ability to command?” Rukamee asked.

“Do you believe I would allow the female to escape the location of the Sacred Relic?”

“Do you believe I would allow them to leave with data concerning the Sacred Forge...”

His voice rose with each question, growing sharper and more dangerous.

“WITHOUT MY CONSENT?”

The Brute immediately dropped to one knee, lowering his head in complete submission.

“Of course not, Exalted One,” Gorvadam added immediately, keeping his head lowered.

For Jiralhanae culture, the hardest thing to adapt to during the Covenant era had never been the technological gap or the strange ways of climbing the hierarchy.

It had been the irritating way everyone was expected to address their superiors.

When a war chief rose to power among the Jiralhanae, he did so by killing the previous one.

He kept one of the fallen leader's lower tusks as proof of his victory and authority.

After that, there was no confusion about who the alpha was.

No elaborate titles.
No flowery language.
No pointless ceremony.

Everyone simply knew.

That was how it had always been on their homeworld.

Then came the Covenant.

Along with an endless list of titles.

Exalted One.
Magnificence.
Supreme Being.

To Gorvadam, it was all nonsense.

Empty words that carried none of the weight they claimed to possess.

A warrior earned respect through strength, not through the number of flattering names attached to him.

But with Rukamee... it was wise to use them from time to time.

Especially when those black eyes settled on you.

Especially when you remembered just how many warriors had died after disappointing him.

“I merely expressed my eagerness to continue the search for the Sacred Artifact,” he added wisely.

“The Sacred Artifact awaits the one worthy of wielding it,” Rukamee said in a reverent tone, much calmer now—to the Brute's considerable relief.

Brutes respected power.

But religion?
Religion made them suspicious.

Atriox had broken the Covenant precisely because faith had made slaves of warriors.

And yet here stood one of Atriox’s deadliest commanders sounding dangerously close to a priest.

Rukamee's position was a remarkably high one by Banished standards, especially considering the religious fanaticism he still openly embraced.

“Warmaster Atriox does not trust sacred relics,” the Brute said carefully.

“No,” Va’Rukamee agreed.
“But he trusts results.”

“And you believe this Forge will give them.”

The Shipmaster looked back toward FOB CONDOR far in the distance.

Toward the humans.

Toward the survivors who had crossed his path.

His mandibles shifted slightly.

The Sangheili equivalent of thought.

“Humans have a way of opening sacred seals and defiling the chambers beyond with their very footsteps.”he said.

Gorvadam grunted.
“If you wish it, I will depart immediately with my finest warriors and destroy them before they challenge you any further, Most Exalted One,” Gorvadam added, making a transparent attempt to earn favor with his superior.

At that, Va’Rukamee finally allowed the faintest trace of calm into his voice.

“You misunderstand.”

The Brute frowned.
“How?”

The Shipmaster turned fully toward the valley now.

Toward the sleeping fortress below.

“I fully intend for them to do so,” Rukamee said at last.

There was something deeply unsettling in his voice.

As he spoke, sharp fangs became visible between his parted mandibles.

Anticipation.

The kind a predator felt when it knew the hunt was only beginning.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ROAD BELOW

The briefing room inside FOB CONDOR had once been a troop deployment bay.

Now it looked like war had moved in permanently and refused to pay rent.

Holo-projectors hung from exposed wiring bundles. Empty ammo crates served as chairs. Half the walls were covered in tactical maps, sensor scans, Banished patrol routes, and handwritten notes from Marines too tired to care about proper formatting anymore.

Somebody had written:

IF THE MOTION TRACKER ACTIVATES, RUN.

Underneath it, somebody else had added:

OR SHOOT.

Ketter had circled both in marker and written:

WORDS TO LIVE BY.

Voss stood near the center holo-table with her arms crossed while the projection of northern Zeta Halo rotated slowly above the battered deck plating.

The map looked ugly.

Which meant it was accurate.

Banished territory spread across huge sections of the ring in red overlays. Patrol routes. Excavation sites. FOBs. Anti-air zones. Wreckage fields.

And farther north—

a cluster of Forerunner structures buried deep beneath mountain terrain.

Rook stood beside the table watching the projection with that same distant look she got whenever memory started dragging claws across the inside of her skull.

“That’s where we got hit,” she said quietly.

LIDAR scans confirmed the presence of something buried directly beneath the coordinates Rook had provided in her report earlier that morning.

Mech entered them into the holographic terminal, and a series of geological readings began taking shape as pale-blue geometric projections across the display.

- towers buried beneath cliffs,
- underground chambers,
- fractured hexagonal platforms,
- and one enormous circular structure buried beneath the mountain like a machine trying to hide itself.

Mutt frowned.
“That doesn't look like a standard Forerunner weapons installation.”

“It wasn’t,” Rook replied.

Voss glanced toward her.
“What did your team find?”

Rook hesitated.

“There were Banished excavation teams already inside.”
She folded her arms tightly.
“They weren't digging for resources or Forerunner metals”

A pause.
“They were searching.”

Mech’s eyes narrowed immediately.
“For what?”

Rook looked toward the center structure in the hologram.

“They were looking for an entrance to the lower levels.”
Her voice dropped slightly.
“We found Forerunner glyphs that matched translations in the UNSC database,”

A series of glowing blue symbols appeared across the terminal. The same pattern repeated again and again beside the translated text:

Hard-Light Replicant
Forge of Eternity.

Ketter frowned and let out an annoyed grunt.
“Shit. That's why those Banished bastards were already waiting for them. They must've known about the Forge.”

“Partially,” Rook said.

“I don't think they know how to access the lower chambers.”

She looked back at the holographic display.

“Hell, I'm not even sure they're capable of doing it.”

On the holographic display, a Banished laser-excavation rig appeared highlighted in red.

The operation had apparently abandoned its efforts after striking a layer of Forerunner alloy far more durable than they had anticipated.

Voss finally spoke up.

“According to the data our *kitty* so kindly recovered from that damned place, it appears the Banished have temporarily suspended operations at the site.”

Rook rolled her eyes inside her helmet.

For fuck's sake, here she goes again with the kitty thing... she thought.

“But there's something that doesn't add up at all,” Voss said.

“The Banished wouldn't have gone through the trouble of wiping out all of Saber, torturing Marines, and generally making our lives a living hell for no reason.”

She tapped a finger against the holographic display.

“That Forge of Eternity thing is important to them.”

Her expression hardened.

“And if we don't secure that site, who the hell knows what those bastards might do with it.”

Ketter leaned back against an ammo crate with a grin slowly spreading across his face.

“So we’re absolutely going down there.”

Voss looked at him.
“Yes.”

“Awesome.”

“No,” Mercer muttered from the back of the room, “not awesome.”

Doc sat near the rear wall cleaning dried blood from medical instruments with the expression of a man deeply disappointed the universe had allowed everybody in this room to survive long enough for another terrible idea.

“You people hear ‘heavily defended ancient death hole’ and react like children seeing fireworks.”

Ketter pointed toward him.
“Exactly. Fireworks are cool.”

Mercer stared at him for a long second.
“One day I’m going to let natural selection finish its job.”

Mech was already pulling data overlays from Banished patrol scans.

Her pale face tightened immediately.

“Oh.”

Mutt glanced over.
“What?”

She pointed at the projection.

“Looks like we've got a clear route.”

The holo shifted again, revealing the terrain around the ruins.

And she was right.

The mountain basin surrounding the site was a nightmare:

- Banished anti-air guns,
- patrol routes,
- sensor towers,
- Wraith staging areas,
- sniper nests,
- and heavily fortified ridgelines.

But right along the edge of a cliff overlooking the Ring's seemingly endless white void, there was a narrow path where a squad of Marines or ODSTs could slip through unnoticed by Banished detection systems.

“The cliff would give us natural visual cover, and those metallic walls don't provide great resonance for their detection systems. But that also means only a small team could get through unnoticed. No large vehicles, and no support once you're in there,” Ketter said.

It sounded like the first genuinely intelligent thing he'd said in days.

The observation left the rest of the team staring at him in mild disbelief.

“That's… correct,” MECH said, glancing at the holographic image.

She was, by far, the most surprised by Ketter's sudden display of intelligence.

“That also means we'll be completely isolated once we're inside the Forerunner ruins,” Mutt said seriously.

“And FOB CONDOR will be the closest UNSC position if things go sideways.”

The room settled into heavy silence while rain tapped softly against CONDOR’s outer hull.

The team immediately realized this was anything but a simple mission.

Not because they weren't used to infiltrations, or holding positions in places they knew next to nothing about.

It was because this sounded a hell of a lot like a one-way trip if anything

went wrong.

And Mutt had just made that point painfully clear.

CONDOR was the only UNSC base within more than thirty kilometers. The Forerunner ruins themselves were nearly sixty kilometers away.

Too far for reinforcements on foot.

The few remaining ground vehicles would have to fight their way through heavily occupied Banished territory.

Air support wasn't much better. Any pilot attempting a rescue would have to make a massive detour around the northwestern section of the Ring just to avoid Banished anti-air batteries.

In short, every rescue option was fucked.

Mutt kept that thought to himself while the room fell silent.

Nobody needed him to say it out loud.

This was the kind of mission normally handed to a SPARTAN fireteam.

Or better yet, to humanity's favorite green-armored hero himself. The Master Chief would probably bring a squad of Marines along for something like this. Maybe two.

But they weren't Spartans.

And they sure as hell weren't the Master Chief.

They weren't genetically enhanced super-soldiers capable of flipping tanks and surviving things that should kill a normal human ten times over.

And a traumatic childhood didn't make them special either.

They were just soldiers.

Maybe a little better equipped than most. And sure, earning a place among the ODSTs was an achievement in itself.

But they all knew this mission would test every one of them.

And frankly, luck had only barely been on their side lately.

They had escaped the Banished fortress.

They had brought Newbie and the Marines home alive.

They had reached CONDOR in one piece.

But none of those victories had come easy.

Each one had been paid for with close calls, bad odds, and more than a little desperation.

The kind of luck they had been riding wasn't the dependable sort.

It was the kind that eventually ran out.

And looking around the room, Mutt had a feeling every member of Gauntlet was thinking the exact same thing.

“Alright then, what's the plan?” Ketter asked with a grin on his face.

That immediately got the group's attention.

“What's wrong with all of you?” Ketter asked, looking around at the members of Gauntlet.

“It's not like you haven't noticed we're the best damn people for the job.”

The grin never left his face.

“Seriously. If someone has to walk into a terrible situation with bad odds, questionable intel, and a very real chance of getting shot...”

He spread his arms.

“Who the hell else were they gonna send?” That immediately lifted everyone's spirits.

“Besides, those bastards owe us for what they did to those Marines and to poor Newbie,” Ketter continued.

He pointed at the team.

“So wipe those long-ass sad faces off and switch into badass mode, people.”

The giant ODST flashed a grin.

“We've got a winning streak to keep alive, hahaha.”

Against all logic, a few smiles started appearing around the room.

Somehow, Ketter's particular brand of stupidity was surprisingly effective at keeping morale alive.

Voss looked over at Ketter and couldn't help but smile.

Damn it, she thought. *If this idiot ever started taking things seriously, he could actually go places.*

Finally, Voss spoke.

“Alright, Gauntlet, let's make this official.”

She looked around the room, making eye contact with each member of the team.

“We all know how hard this is going to be.”

“But as our XXXL-sized team member just pointed out, we're the best damn option for the job.”

A grin crept onto her face.

“So let's show the entire UNSC what a handful of ODSTs can do.”

“Let's do the kind of job that would have a Spartan pissing himself inside that fancy armor if he had to pull it off.”

That earned an immediate burst of laughter from the entire room.

Even Mutt cracked a smile.

The statement was complete bullshit, and every one of them knew it.

Which was exactly why it was funny.

“Everyone grab what you need and get ready. We move out in fifteen,” Voss ordered.

She was already turning back toward the holographic projector, where MECH was waiting.

The two immediately began discussing routes, terrain features, and possible Banished patrol patterns, searching for the best way to slip through unnoticed.

Around them, Gauntlet got to work.

Mutt wasted no time.

He headed straight for the armory and requested additional magazines for his MA40, along with six magazines of Magnum ammunition for the M6C SOCOM that had practically become a permanent fixture in his thigh holster.

While performing his gear check, he couldn't help but notice Ketter's excitement when the armorer handed him a backpack-fed ammunition adapter capable of supplying over two thousand rounds of high-explosive ammunition to his beloved M247H Heavy Machine Gun.

Ketter stared at it for a moment like a kid on Christmas morning.

Then a massive grin spread across his face.

“Hell yes,” he said, practically hugging the equipment.

“Now *that's* what I'm talking about.”

The smile stretched from ear to ear.

“You are entirely too happy about this,” Mutt muttered.

“Buddy,” Ketter replied, “we just spent two days hiding, getting tortured, shot at, and emotionally violated by terrible military food.”
He cracked his neck.
“I’m ready to shoot somebody again.”

“You always are.”

“That’s called consistency.”

Across the room, Rook was checking ammunition for her sniper rifle while Ketter very obviously continued staring at her every few seconds like subtlety had personally insulted him.

Finally he wandered over beside her.

A slightly flirtatious grin appeared on his face.

“So I guess it's official now, huh?” he said.

“Even the boss includes you when she talks about *all* of Gauntlet.”

He shrugged casually.

“Looks like you're stuck with us.”

Rook continued loading the magazines for her SRS99 one by one, never looking up from her work.

“Looks that way,” she replied dryly.

Ketter, unfortunately, interpreted it as encouragement.

He leaned against the crate beside her anyway.

“You know, I’m actually very charming once people survive enough firefights with me.”

Rook slid a fresh magazine into the rifle without looking up.
“I’d rather die in a firefight.”

Mech nearly choked trying not to laugh.

The rest of the team chuckled quietly as they continued preparing their gear.

Ketter let out a long sigh and adopted the posture of a defeated soldier.

Then he turned toward the rest of the team and raised his voice dramatically.

“Alright, alright. Show's over, idiots.”

“Nothing to see here.”

“Move along.”

The expression on his face suggested that yet another one of his brilliant plans had met a tragic and untimely end.

Mutt, in particular, was grinning after witnessing Ketter's latest failed attempt to win over a woman like Rook.

The little time Mutt had spent around Rook had made one thing abundantly clear: she was not the kind of woman a man could casually flirt with and expect a warm response.

At best, you'd get an answer colder than the near-absolute-zero reactors aboard an ONI cruiser.

At worst...

Well, there was a very real possibility of taking a boot directly to the balls.

Considering the circumstances, Mutt figured poor Ketter hadn't done too badly.

He was still standing, after all.

Even so, Mutt couldn't help feeling a little pleased that a woman as beautiful as Hana Vuković was still, for all practical purposes, *available*.

The thought brought a faint smile to his face as he finished checking his gear.

So Mutt gathered a little more courage than he'd needed for his little excursion into the Banished fortress and made his way over to Rook.

Which was saying something.

Sneaking into a Banished stronghold, rescuing prisoners, and getting out alive had somehow felt less intimidating.

Rook was still seated where she'd been before, methodically loading rounds into her SRS99 magazines with the same calm precision she applied to everything else.

“So...” Mutt said, using the calmest tone he could manage.

“You okay with going back to that place?”

It wasn't exactly a smooth opening.

It wasn't even particularly clever.

But it was honest.

And after everything he'd learned about Hana Vuković, Mutt suspected honesty would get him a lot farther than trying to be charming.

Rook slid another round into the magazine before finally pausing.

For a moment, her attention remained on the rifle in her hands.

Then she glanced up at him.

Mutt still hadn't gotten over Hana's blue eyes.

And the fact that she was looking directly at him now made things infinitely worse.

His palms started sweating to the point that he was genuinely worried his

M4A1 might slip from his hands and hit the deck.

Then he'd end up looking like Newbie on his first day at the firing range.

Which, considering he'd just infiltrated a Banished fortress and lived to tell the tale, was a frankly ridiculous thing to be worried about.

Yet there he was.

Standing in front of one woman.

Nervous as hell.

Mutt silently cursed himself and tightened his grip on the rifle, hoping to God she couldn't somehow see the absolute train wreck currently happening inside his head.

Finally, Rook answered.

“You know... I'm honestly not sure.”

A trace of sadness crossed her face.

It was such an unusual expression on her that it caught Mutt completely off guard.

Most of the time, Rook seemed carved from stone.

Calm. Controlled. Untouchable.

But moments like this reminded him that beneath the armor, the medals, and the reputation, she was still human.

She was one of the UNSC's finest snipers.

Credited with more than two hundred confirmed Banished kills.

A former member of one of the most respected ODST teams in service.

A woman forged from iron and fire.

Yet none of that made her immune to loss.

None of that erased memory.

Looking at her then, Mutt was reminded of something easy to forget in soldiers like Hana Vuković.

The stronger someone appeared on the outside, the easier it was to overlook the weight they carried inside.

And for the first time since he'd met her, Rook looked tired.

And the truth was, Mutt understood.

Part of ONI's brutal training pipeline had involved a daily regimen of emotional suppressants. The kind that came in completely black boxes that practically looked evil.

The worst part was that they worked.

They worked *too damn well*.

All the ugly things ONI had asked of him during those years somehow felt distant. Detached.

Like he wasn't really the one doing them.

Like he was just a passenger riding around inside his own body.

An observer watching someone else make the decisions.

Like controlling a character in one of those augmented-reality games kids spent their time frying their last remaining brain cells on.

But the real problem came when you stopped taking them.

Then everything came back.

The losses hurt.

Jesus Christ, they hurt.

Losing an entire team wasn't like losing a few classmates you used to sit next to in school.

They were friends.

Brothers and sisters fighting for the same cause.

Hell, they were often the closest thing a soldier would ever admit to having as a family.

And for many, it wasn't even an exaggeration.

Some truly had nobody else left.

Time took people.

The Banished took people.

The Covenant had taken people before them.

And before that, the Insurrection had done the same across the Outer Colonies.

The universe was one giant goddamn meat grinder.

Ending up alone was easy.

Mutt knew that.

Looking at Rook, he realized she knew it too.

In a way, the same truth had scarred them both.

Mutt remained silent for a few seconds.

For once, he wasn't looking for a clever response. Or a line to impress someone.

He simply understood.

“I lost my team once,” he said at last.

Rook looked up slightly.

“ONI.”

It wasn't a question.

“Yeah.”

Mutt rested his rifle against a nearby table.

“For a long time, I thought I was fine. Thought I was one of those tough bastards who just kept moving forward.”

A small bitter smile appeared on his face.

“Turns out I was pretty fucked up and just too stubborn to admit it.”

To both their surprise, Rook let out a faint laugh through her nose.

Small.

Brief.

But real.

“That sounds exactly like something an ONI operative would say.”

“Yeah, well. They pay us to make bad decisions.”

“I thought they paid you to lie.”

“That too.”

That earned a much more noticeable smile from her.

Not a full smile.

But enough.

For the first time since he'd met her, Mutt felt like he was looking at Hana and not the legendary sniper known as Rook.

The silence that followed no longer felt uncomfortable.

They simply sat there while the rest of Gauntlet prepared their gear around them.

Finally, Rook spoke.

“Sometimes I'm afraid I'll forget their voices.”

Mutt looked at her.

“Your team?”

She nodded.

“I remember their faces perfectly. But their voices... sometimes they get blurry.”

That hit Mutt harder than any combat story.

Because he understood exactly what she meant.

“I don't think they disappear,” he replied after a moment.

“No?”

“No. I think when you forget, it just hurts a little less.”

Rook remained thoughtful.

“And does that make things better?”

Mutt took several seconds to answer.

“No.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“That's a pretty shitty answer.”

“I know.”

Another small smile appeared on Rook's face.

“But I believe you.”

For some reason, that meant more to Mutt than it should have.

For a few seconds neither of them said anything.

Then Rook picked up one of her SRS99 magazines again.

“Thank you.”

Mutt blinked.

“For what?”

“For not trying to fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“This.”

She made a vague gesture toward herself.

“Most people always try to come up with something smart to say.”

Mutt shrugged.

“I'm not that smart.”

“I noticed.”

“Hey.”

Rook's smile grew just a little wider.

And for the first time since she'd arrived at CONDOR, the sadness in her eyes seemed to retreat, if only a little.

Outside the FOB, the valley existed in that strange balance between alien wilderness and war.

Creatures howled somewhere in the distance.

Wind whispered through the trees.

Rain continued to fall steadily across the landscape.

And beyond the northern mountains, Banished artillery rumbled like distant thunder.

Hidden within those mountains, buried beneath ancient stone for what was likely thousands of years, lay Forerunner structures and artifacts older than the entirety of human civilization.

Something was waiting.

Something the Banished wanted.

Something Va' Rukamee was willing to hunt humanity for.

And in just a few minutes, Gauntlet would be setting out.

Straight into what looked suspiciously like a trap.

Armed with human weapons.

A little optimism.

And a handful of luck.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BELOW THE MOUNTAIN

The journey into the mountains had been... surprisingly smooth.

Aside from a few complaints from Ketter and the occasional sarcastic:

“Are we there yet?”

Which immediately earned him a:

“Ketter, for fuck's sake, shut up.”

From Voss.

The trek across the slopes and through the hidden pass had been genuinely uneventful.

More than once the team turned toward a noise in the trees.

More than once they paused to listen to distant artillery echoing across the mountains.

And more than once an absurdly loud fart from Ketter was briefly mistaken for a grenade detonation or some other imminent threat.

To his everlasting pride.

And everyone else's disappointment.

But somehow...

Somehow they had slipped through the entire damned Banished surveillance network unnoticed.

No alarms.

No patrols.

No plasma fire.

No Brutes trying to cave their skulls in.

Nothing.

Just rain.

Wind.

Mud.

And the growing feeling that things were going far too well.

Mutt wasn't superstitious.

Most soldiers claimed they weren't.

But every veteran knew the universe had a twisted sense of humor.

The moment a mission started feeling easy was usually the moment everything went straight to hell.

Still.

For the time being, they remained undetected.

A small victory.

A rare one.

“Yay, team,” Mutt thought.

And speaking of teams, something had been bothering Mutt ever since they left CONDOR.

It wasn't the way Imani Voss had spoken to poor Newbie.

Deep down, he knew Voss had done the right thing.

Doc Mercer had shared the medical report with the rest of Gauntlet before they departed.

The kid was a mess.

A fractured lower jaw.

The horrific wound on one side of his face had swollen enough to nearly shut one eye completely.

Three broken ribs.

Second- and third-degree burns across his back.

And a serious infection caused by the "tools" the Banished had used during his interrogation.

His torture.

No.

What bothered Mutt wasn't that Newbie had been ordered to stay behind.

It was the way the kid had nearly broken down when he heard it.

Like being left at FOB CONDOR was somehow worse than everything the Banished had already done to him.

Like he had failed.

Like staying behind while the rest of Gauntlet moved out was some kind of personal defeat.

Mutt remembered the look in his eye.

The desperate attempt to argue.

The way he kept insisting he could still help.

The way he kept trying to stand straighter despite looking like he was one hard cough away from collapsing.

And that bothered Mutt more than he cared to admit.

Because he'd seen that look before.

Hell.

He'd worn that look before.

The look of a soldier who thought his worth was measured solely by whether he could still carry a rifle.

The look of someone terrified that if they stopped fighting for even a

moment, they'd be left behind.

Forgotten.

Replaced.

The worst part was that Newbie probably wasn't even aware of it himself.

He genuinely wanted to help.

Wanted to prove he belonged.

Wanted to prove that surviving what the Banished had done to him hadn't broken him.

But nobody had looked at the medical report and seen a Marine fit for combat.

They had seen a kid held together by painkillers, bandages, and sheer stubbornness.

And unfortunately for Newbie...

Stubbornness wasn't a recognized medical treatment.

And boy, would the kid have been pissed if he could see what Mutt was looking at right now.

Spread out before them, across a vast plain that looked equally natural and artificial in origin, stood an enormous metallic entrance built in unmistakable Forerunner geometry.

Ancient.

Impossibly massive.

And buried deep within the mountainside.

In front of it sat a gigantic Banished laser-mining machine.

Its industrial frame was covered in the faction's usual design philosophy: sharp angles, red armor plating, spikes, and enough aggressive-looking metal to make the whole thing seem personally offended by the concept of safety regulations.

Of course, Mutt thought.

The Banished couldn't build anything without making it look red, pointy, and stupid.

The massive excavator sat silent for the moment.

Abandoned.

Or at least appearing to be.

The enormous scars carved into the surrounding rock showed just how much effort had gone into trying to force a way inside.

Apparently without much success.

Even from this distance, the Forerunner structure looked untouched.

Unyielding.

As though it had spent thousands of years ignoring everything the galaxy could throw at it and intended to continue doing so for a few thousand more.

Mutt slowly lowered his binoculars.

Whatever the Forge of Eternity was.

Whatever secret was hidden beyond that entrance.

Gauntlet was about to find out.

The team began their descent toward the massive entrance, passing by the mining machine that had been left completely abandoned—just like everything else the Banished decided was no longer capable of serving its purpose.

The excavator sat motionless.

Silent.

Forgotten.

A monument to failure built from red armor plating and industrial stubbornness.

And there, beside the absurdly oversized entrance, stood a Forerunner terminal that looked almost tiny by comparison.

Almost.

A tangled mess of cables ran from the ancient device to a collection of external power cells scattered across the ground.

More cables fed into what appeared to be a Banished attempt at a remote intrusion system.

A crude hybrid of stolen technology, brute force engineering, and wishful thinking.

It was obvious they hadn't accomplished much.

The massive door remained exactly as it had likely stood for thousands of years.

Unopened.

Untouched.

Unimpressed.

Whatever calculations the Banished had performed.

Whatever power they had poured into the terminal.

Whatever threats, explosives, drills, lasers, or sacred promises they had thrown at it...

The structure appeared to have ignored all of them equally.

The entrance looked pristine.

As if the last several months of Banished effort had amounted to little more than an insect trying to batter down a bunker door.

Mutt couldn't help but smirk.

For once, it seemed the Forerunners had built something even the Banished couldn't break through by hitting it repeatedly.

MECH was the first to take position at the Forerunner terminal, surprising absolutely nobody.

Then again, it wasn't as if anyone else had the slightest idea how to disable a Forerunner security system.

The small ODST climbed onto the access platform, looking for all the world

like a conductor about to lead an orchestra.

She poked, scanned, and investigated the ancient structure until she finally found an access point for her TAC-PAD.

Then came the waiting.

Minutes passed.

For MECH, it was probably routine.

For everyone else, it felt like an eternity.

Finally—

“I GOT IT!”

The shout nearly made half the team jump.

A series of holographic control panels burst into existence in front of her, causing MECH herself to nearly lose her balance.

Pale-blue light flooded the area.

Rows of Forerunner glyphs appeared in the air like something straight out of an old science-fiction movie.

Voss approached cautiously.

“You sure you know what you're doing, kid?”

MECH looked over her shoulder.

“Honestly? Not really.”

She smiled.

Which was somehow the least reassuring thing she could have said.

Before anyone could stop her, she pressed a large blue symbol that vaguely resembled an outstretched hand.

The instant her fingers touched the hologram, the entire facility answered.

A deep metallic sound rolled through the mountains.

Low.

Ancient.

Powerful.

The vibration resonated through stone, metal, and bone alike.

For a brief moment, Mutt was reminded of recordings he'd heard as a child.

Massive creatures calling to one another across Earth's oceans.

Whales, he thought.

The sound wasn't identical.

But it carried the same feeling.

Something enormous.

Something old.

Something awakening.

Instinctively, every member of Gauntlet flinched.

Several raised their hands toward their helmets as though they could somehow block out the noise.

The gesture was completely useless.

The sound wasn't entering through their ears.

It felt like it was passing straight through them.

Slowly, the colossal entrance began to move.

It appeared to float in midair, suspended by something resembling magnetic antigravity technology—only far, far more advanced.

The structure was forged from a practically indestructible alloy.

It had to weigh hundreds of tons.

Maybe more.

Yet now it danced before them.

Massive sections shifted effortlessly, sliding apart and folding into intricate

geometric patterns along the sides of the entrance.

Layer upon layer overlapped with impossible precision.

Each segment gliding over the next.

Growing smaller.

More compact.

More elegant.

As though the mountain was rearranging itself.

No grinding gears.

No screaming metal.

No visible machinery.

Just silent, impossible motion.

Ancient technology awakening from a sleep that had lasted millennia.

The opening widened.

And widened.

And widened.

Until at last a void appeared within the mountain.

Enormous.

Large enough for a UNSC frigate to pass through.

The sight was breathtaking.

Majestic.

Terrifying.

The kind of thing that reminded humanity exactly how small it really was.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Nobody moved.

Even Ketter seemed to have run out of comments.

The darkness beyond the entrance stretched deep into the mountain, illuminated only by faint traces of pale blue light buried somewhere far inside.

It felt less like entering a structure and more like standing before the mouth of some gigantic creature buried beneath the earth.

Waiting.

Watching.

Ready to swallow them whole.

Mutt found himself wondering if the Banished had failed to enter this place not because they couldn't.

But because something never wanted them to.

Mutt stood near the entrance staring into the dark while cold mountain wind rolled down through the valley.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Ketter announced immediately.

Voss didn’t even look at him.
“We’re going in.”

“Fantastic.”

Rook checked the charge on her sniper rifle one final time before stepping toward the opening.

The first thing that greeted them on the other side of the entrance was a body.

An ODST.

Lying beside a Forerunner terminal identical to the one MECH had just activated.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

The trooper lay slumped against the base of the terminal, one arm still extended toward the controls.

As though in his final moments he had reached for the panel.

As though he had been the one who sealed the entrance.

Mutt immediately recognized the insignia painted on the shoulder plate.

SABER.

Mutt immediately turned toward Rook.

She had already recognized the body.

“My team got in through here too,” she said quietly.

Her eyes lingered on the fallen ODST for only a moment.

“The machinery outside was probably brought in by the Banished afterward. Hayes closed the door before...”

The sentence died before reaching its conclusion.

Before he died.

Before whatever happened happened.

She never said it.

Didn't need to.

Instead, she kept walking.

Stepping past the body.

Past the terminal.

Past a memory she clearly had no interest in revisiting.

“Let's keep moving,” she said.

“It's still a long way down to the lower chambers.”

Nobody argued.

Gauntlet fell in behind her.

The body of Hayes remained where it had fallen, still guarding the entrance in death just as he apparently had in life.

That quieted everybody.

Because now the tunnel wasn't just another mission objective.

It was a grave.

Just as they reached an intersection, they found another ODST.

The name stenciled across his right sleeve read:

Nathan Brooks — "Havoc."

And judging by the scene around him, the nickname had been well earned.

The man had left absolute devastation in his wake before going down.

Four Grunts lay scattered across the floor, riddled with bullet holes.

Their neon-blue blood stained the ancient Forerunner walls and floor in dull, uneven streaks.

To his right, two Jackals lay twisted in unnatural positions.

Missing limbs.

Broken bodies.

The likely result of a fragmentation grenade.

Humanity had learned long ago that explosives were a remarkably effective way of dealing with those shield-carrying bastards.

And finally, at Havoc's feet, lay a Brute.

A Ravager still clutched in one massive hand.

A combat knife buried deep in its skull.

Havoc himself had suffered catastrophic plasma burns across his chest.

The armor there had been completely destroyed.

The exposed bone beneath blackened and charred by Ravager fire.

There was no way of knowing exactly how the fight had unfolded.

No way to know who struck first.

Or who died first.

But one thing was obvious.

That ODST had fought until the very end.

And he had made damn sure he wasn't going alone.

Voss crouched beside the scene, silently studying the evidence.

The angles.

The impacts.

The final positions.

The story left behind.

After a few moments she nodded once.

“Good work, soldier,” she muttered quietly.

“You gave them hell.”

Then she stood and switched to the squad-wide comm channel.

“Alright, Gauntlet.”

Her voice immediately became all business.

“Check your gear. This is the last checkpoint.”

The team paused to perform one final inspection.

Magazines.

Weapons.

Medical kits.

Communications.

Everything.

Voss's voice came through the comms again.

“After this point, we fight with whatever we've got.”

The statement hung in the air.

Nobody argued.

Nobody joked.

Not even Ketter.

Because everyone understood exactly what she meant.

There would be no armory deeper inside these ruins.

No resupply.

No reinforcements.

No easy way out.

Only whatever waited below.

And the ammunition they carried with them.

Mutt checked the magazine on the M6C SOCOM Mercer had given him.

Then he checked the suppressor, making sure it was still seated properly.

The pistol was heavy.

But it felt right in his hands.

And if he was being honest, he'd already grown attached to it.

Mercer noticed immediately.

“Getting attached to material possessions is a bad habit, you know,” the old ODST said in a mildly sarcastic tone.

Mutt smiled as he seated the magazine back into the weapon.

Then he looked over at Mercer and replied,

“I’m emotionally invested now.”

Mercer grunted.
“That’s how bad habits start.”

Ketter hefted the M247H machine gun onto his shoulder with visible

enthusiasm.

“Anybody else excited?”

“No,” said literally everybody.

“Cowards.”

The temperature dropped immediately.

Outside, Zeta Halo had smelled like rain, wet earth, pine, smoke.

Inside smelled sterile.

Dead.

Beyond the intersection, the passage split into two separate paths.

One appeared to lead into an enormous empty void.

The chamber was so massive that Mutt's helmet optics struggled to determine where it ended.

Gigantic walls stretched upward into darkness.

It reminded him of the interstellar ports he'd seen in old UNSC archives—facilities capable of housing entire fleets of ships undergoing maintenance.

Except this one was completely empty.

No vessels.

No machinery.

No signs of activity.

Just silence.

Ancient, unsettling silence.

The second route led down a corridor ending at another sealed bulkhead.

And naturally, MECH immediately sprinted toward the attached terminal.

“Careful—” Voss began.

Before anyone could stop her, the door slid open.

Just like that.

No hacking.

No translating.

No desperate button mashing.

The mere presence of the young ODST seemed to be enough.

The massive Forerunner door quietly retracted into the walls.

MECH stopped in front of the terminal and blinked.

“Wow.”

She looked around at the rest of the team.

“I didn't even have to do anything.”

Rook snorted softly.

“Same thing happened to us.”

She adjusted the sling on her SRS99.

“Some of the doors opened on their own. Others required us to interact with the terminals.”

She shrugged.

“To be honest, I don't understand a damn thing about how this place works.”

Beyond the doorway stretched an enormous tunnel lined with countless secondary passages branching off in different directions.

The scale of the place was staggering.

Some of the side doors stood open, revealing glimpses of dark corridors and distant chambers beyond.

Others remained sealed shut.

Those emitted a faint red glow along their edges, bathing the metallic walls in dim crimson light.

Even without understanding the Forerunner systems, the meaning was

obvious.

Locked.

Sealed tight.

Whatever mechanism controlled the facility had decided those sections were off-limits.

Mutt slowly swept his rifle across the maze of corridors.

There were enough branching routes down here to hide an army.

Rook led the team from the front as they moved slowly through the facility's endless corridors.

They followed the trail SABER had left behind.

Sometimes it was a pile of Grunt bodies riddled with bullet holes.

Other times it was a group of Jackals with precise shots through their heads.

Sometimes it was nothing more than footprints.

Spent shell casings.

A dropped magazine.

And sometimes all that remained was a smear of human blood leading deeper into the ruins.

But every time, sooner or later, they found another member of SABER.

Tyler Grant — "FROST."

Owen Price, Combat Medic.

Emily Carter.

One by one.

The deeper they went, the more the story revealed itself.

SABER hadn't been wiped out in a single battle.

They had fought.

Retreated.

Fought again.

And paid for every meter of ground.

Each time they found one of the fallen, someone from Gauntlet would offer a few words.

Nothing formal.

Nothing rehearsed.

Just soldiers speaking to soldiers.

“Good work, buddy.”

“Hell of a fight.”

“You did your part.”

Even Ketter, whose version of respect was somewhat unconventional.

Looking at one particularly devastating kill zone, he shook his head and muttered,

“You fucked 'em up good, brother.”

That earned a few snorts over the squad channel.

But nobody disagreed.

Because every one of the fallen ODSTs had clearly made the Banished pay dearly for their lives.

And strangely enough, those small comments helped.

They weren't bringing SABER back.

They weren't changing what had happened.

But they acknowledged it.

The fight.

The sacrifice.

The fact that these soldiers had mattered.

Rook never said anything.

She simply continued leading the team forward.

Yet with every body they passed and every quiet word spoken behind her, a small part of the weight she'd been carrying seemed to ease.

Her team hadn't been abandoned.

Gauntlet had made sure of that.

They were remembering them.

One soldier at a time.

MECH now had her data-pad mounted to a forearm bracket, checking it constantly as they advanced through the ruins.

And there were a lot of strange readings.

Electromagnetic interference repeatedly disrupted the personal radar systems integrated into every ODST's HUD.

More than once, someone had spun around and leveled a weapon at an entirely empty section of corridor.

Strange noises seemed to follow the team through the facility.

Metallic echoes.

Distant clicks.

Sounds that never quite repeated the same way twice.

The motion trackers weren't helping either.

Red contacts would appear for a split second.

Then vanish.

Sometimes directly behind them.

Sometimes ahead.

Eventually, and to everyone's surprise, Doc Mercer broke the silence.

“Fuck it,” he said.

“I'm telling you, this place is haunted.”

Several helmets turned toward him.

Ketter snorted.

“I never figured you for one of those idiots who believes in fucking ghosts, old man.”

Mercer kept walking.

His rifle hanging loosely across his chest.

“When you've lived as long as I have,” he said quietly, “and spent as much time around death...”

The old ODST paused.

For the first time in a while, there wasn't even a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“You see things, son.”

The tone alone was enough to send a chill through the rest of the squad.

Even Ketter didn't have an immediate comeback.

And for the next few moments, the only sounds were the team's footsteps echoing through the ancient Forerunner corridors.

And the strange noises that seemed to echo back.

MECH, however, refused to accept that explanation.

Her analytical mind simply would not allow her to believe in alien ghosts.

Not when there had to be a rational answer.

Even if she hadn't found it yet.

She continued studying the readings scrolling across her data-pad, searching for patterns hidden beneath the interference.

Electromagnetic fluctuations.

Sensor anomalies.

Localized signal reflections.

There had to be something.

Some mechanism.

Some environmental factor.

Some piece of Forerunner technology affecting the team's equipment.

Anything was more believable than a haunted alien ruin.

As far as MECH was concerned, the supernatural was just science that people hadn't understood yet.

She certainly wasn't about to be swayed by the superstitions of an elderly combat medic.

A combat medic who had probably spent more years surviving on anti-anxiety medication and dangerously excessive amounts of caffeine than was medically advisable for any human being.

Honestly, she was fairly certain those two substances were the only things still powering Mercer.

The old man probably had more pharmaceuticals in his bloodstream than blood.

Which, in MECH's professional opinion, would eventually drive anybody insane.

Mercer glanced in her direction.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

MECH froze.

“I didn't say anything.”

“You didn't have to.”

The old medic pointed a finger at her without even turning around.

“I can hear the judgment.”

A few snickers came across the squad channel.

Even Voss smiled.

And despite herself, MECH found the corner of her mouth twitching upward.

Still.

Ghosts were ridiculous.

Absolutely ridiculous.

...Probably.

But what bothered Mutt the most wasn't the strange noises.

Or the faulty motion trackers.

Or even Mercer's increasingly convincing ghost theory.

It was the feeling that something was following them.

He knew that feeling.

Far too well.

More than once during his ONI days, he'd watched targets suddenly glance over their shoulders moments before spotting him—or another member of his old team.

They never knew exactly what was wrong.

They just felt it.

That primitive instinct buried deep in the human brain.

The sensation that unseen eyes were locked onto the back of your neck.

The feeling of becoming prey.

And Mutt hated it.

Because he also knew another uncomfortable truth.

By the time you felt it...

It was usually already too late.

Too late to run.

Too late to hide.

Too late to change whatever was about to happen.

Yet despite that constant pressure crawling along his nerves, nothing happened.

No attacks.

No ambushes.

No movement.

Every strange reading vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Every noise faded into silence.

Every suspicious shadow turned out to be exactly that.

A shadow.

The facility continued swallowing them deeper and deeper into its labyrinth of corridors.

And every time Mutt turned around expecting to find someone standing there...

There was nothing.

Nothing except ancient metal.

Ancient silence.

And the growing feeling that whatever was watching them was perfectly content to wait.

Voss raised a hand.

Everybody froze instantly.

Ahead, the tunnel widened into a massive chamber swallowed by darkness.

The floor was covered in shell casings.

Human shell casings.

ODST.

Mutt's stomach tightened.

Rook went completely still.

Near the center of the chamber sat a barricade.

Or what remained of one.

UNSC supply crates had been stacked into firing lines and portable shield emitters burned black by plasma impacts. Blood stained the metallic floor in huge dried smears while shattered sniper casings littered the elevated platforms above.

A massacre.

No.

A last stand.

Ketter's grin vanished immediately.

"Jesus…"

Rook walked slowly toward the barricade.

Nobody stopped her.

A dead ODST sat slumped against the crate wall near the center position.

Helmet still on.

Shotgun still clutched in both hands.

Three dead Grunts lay in front of him.

A Brute corpse rested farther back with its throat cut nearly ear to ear.

The ODST's armor was ripped apart across the chest.

Plasma burns.

Close range.

Mutt noticed the empty magazines first.

The soldier had fought until literally nothing remained.

That body hit Rook harder than all the others.

The ODST's armor bore a bright red stripe running across the helmet, making him look more like a racing vehicle than a soldier.

On his chest was the emblem of two crossed sabers.

SABER.

Their leader.

Her former superior.

The man who had ordered her to leave.

The man who had sent her back with the little information they had managed to gather.

He had known.

Known she was the only one with a chance.

The only one who could slip through kilometers of Banished territory alone and survive.

The only one who could get the coordinates back to CONDOR.

The only one who could warn the next team.

Warn Gauntlet.

Warn all of them what waited down here.

But knowing that didn't make it hurt any less.

Guilt wasn't logical.

It didn't care about orders.

Or probabilities.

Or sacrifice.

It settled inside a person like a vortex of pain, anger, and grief.

Rook slowly knelt beside him.

For a moment she simply stared.

Then she reached out and placed a hand on her former commander's shoulder.

“Damn it, Sergeant...” she said quietly.

“I'm so sorry.”

Her voice faltered.

“I should have—”

“Don't do that to yourself.”

The words came from Mutt.

Rook looked up.

He had stepped beside her without her noticing.

“He knew what was going to happen,” Mutt said.

“He made the best call he could.”

His voice was calm.

Firm.

The voice of someone who had carried his own ghosts for a very long time.

“He knew you were the only one who could make it.”

“The only one who could get those coordinates back to CONDOR.”

“The only one who could warn the next team.”

He gestured toward the rest of Gauntlet.

“Us.”

Rook remained silent.

Mutt continued.

“I know it hurts.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“But carry it.”

“Don't let it stop you.”

His gaze drifted toward the darkness deeper inside the facility.

“And if you really want to honor him...”

“Honor all of SABER...”

“Let's finish the damn mission.”

For several seconds neither of them spoke.

Then Rook slowly stood.

The grief was still there.

It probably always would be.

But something else had returned as well.

Purpose.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“You're right.”

She looked deeper into the ruins.

“Let's kill the bastards who did this.”

A faint smile appeared beneath Mutt's visor.

“There we go.”

“That's the spirit.”

Before the team moved on, Mutt gave the scene one last look.

His eyes lingered on the fallen ODST's armor.

At first glance, the damage looked like the usual punishment armor suffered in combat.

Then he noticed the cuts.

Deep.

Clean.

Far too clean.

Long gouges carved through titanium plating as though the armor had been made of paper.

Mutt felt his stomach tighten.

He had seen wounds like that before.

Energy sword wounds.

Shit.

Without drawing attention to himself, he glanced toward Voss.

She was already staring at the same marks.

Already reaching the same conclusion.

“That son of a bitch was here,” she said quietly.

Mutt nodded.

For several seconds neither of them spoke.

Everything suddenly made a lot more sense.

Finally Mutt broke the silence.

“That explains the bodies.”

“The obsession with getting to this place.”

“The bastard wanted whatever's down here.”

His eyes drifted toward the darkness beyond the corridor.

“And I'm willing to bet he only pulled out because he was afraid Rook would come back with reinforcements and take the site.”

The realization settled heavily on both of them.

“He followed her,” Mutt continued.

“All the way back to the entrance.”

“Shit,” Voss muttered.

A memory surfaced immediately.

The abandoned command post.

The siege.

The way they had been trapped.

The way events had unfolded almost too perfectly.

“That means he was probably the one who boxed us into that abandoned command center when we found the survivors.”

Mutt nodded again.

The pieces were fitting together.

Too well.

There was only one problem.

One question that refused to go away.

He looked back at the deep sword wounds etched into the dead ODST's armor.

Then into the darkness ahead.

And finally he spoke.

“Why the hell did he leave us alive?”

Neither of them had an answer.

And somehow...

That was the most unsettling part.

The squad continued deeper beneath the mountain.

And the ruins grew stranger.

The tunnels no longer looked abandoned.

Some sections still carried power.

Doors opened automatically as they approached.

Hard-light pathways formed beneath their boots before fading away behind them seconds later.

Gravity shifted subtly in certain chambers, enough that spent shell casings drifted briefly before settling again.

A short distance later, they found something none of them had expected.

A Forerunner Phaeton.

The ancient aircraft rested silently inside a recessed chamber off the main corridor.

Even after thousands of years, it looked futuristic.

Alien.

Wrong in all the ways Forerunner technology usually was.

The vehicle appeared to be constructed almost entirely from hard light.

Sections of its frame seemed suspended in place rather than physically connected, held together by the same impossibly advanced antigravitational technology that permeated nearly every piece of Forerunner engineering.

Yet something was off.

Very off.

The Phaeton looked incomplete.

Not damaged.

Incomplete.

Parts of the hull flickered intermittently.

Solid one moment.

Translucent the next.

Entire sections of hard-light architecture appeared faded or partially formed.

Like a printed document that had run out of ink halfway through the process.

The vehicle still existed.

Still functioned, perhaps.

But only partially.

The result was strangely unsettling.

One side appeared pristine and fully realized.

The other looked like a ghostly outline of itself.

An unfinished thought frozen in physical form.

MECH immediately began recording scans.

“Okay,” she said, staring at the readings.

“That's definitely not supposed to look like that.”

“That's your professional opinion?” Ketter asked.

“Yes.”

“Very informative.”

“Thank you.”

The exchange earned a few chuckles, but nobody took their eyes off the aircraft.

Because the longer they stared at it, the stranger it became.

It wasn't broken.

It wasn't decaying.

It looked as though reality itself had simply stopped finishing the job.

Just as the group continued advancing through the hangar where they had found the Phaeton, a mechanical noise echoed through the interior of the ruins.

A second later, a series of warning alerts sounded across every piece of equipment carried by Gauntlet.

Thermal radar.

HUD proximity sensors.

Motion trackers.

Everything lit up at once.

MECH's TAC-PAD in particular emitted a sharp burst of static-like interference.

That immediately put everyone on alert.

Weapons came up.

Eyes searched the surrounding corridors.

“What the hell was that?” Mutt asked.

“Shit,” Ketter said.

“Now I'm starting to think the old man's theory about this place being haunted doesn't sound so crazy...”

“Focus, team,” Voss snapped.

“The only supernatural thing you're gonna see today is my boot up your ass if I die in here.”

The comment earned a few nervous smirks, but nobody lowered their guard.

Finally, after checking her TAC-PAD, MECH spoke.

“It was an energy spike.”

She continued studying the display.

“Like the entire facility was draining... energy...”

Then she stopped.

“The weird part is the source.”

MECH's eyes widened completely.

An expression of pure disbelief spread across her face.

“Where is the facility drawing the energy from?” Voss asked immediately.

MECH didn't answer right away.

She simply stared at the TAC-PAD.

Her eyes moved rapidly across the readings.

Then she frowned.

Then frowned even harder.

“That's... not possible.”

“What's not possible?” Mutt asked.

MECH swallowed.

“The source.”

Voss took a step closer.

“MECH.”

The young ODST looked up from the display.

Still wearing an expression of complete disbelief.

“The readings are indicating that the energy isn't coming from anywhere inside the facility.”

Nobody spoke.

“It's coming from outside.”

She looked back at the TAC-PAD.

“Way outside.”

The confusion in her voice only deepened.

“Whatever is powering this place... it's so far away that the numbers don't even make sense.”

The chamber around the team continued to hum softly.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

The only sounds were the distant echoes of ancient machinery carrying through the ruins.

Somewhere below them, something very old was beginning to awaken.

Systems that had slept for thousands of years were stirring once more.

Power flowed through forgotten conduits.

Ancient mechanisms resumed their purpose.

And far deeper still, in the deepest reaches of the Ring itself...

The Forge of Eternity began to breathe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MACHINE GOD

The deeper they went, the less the mountain felt natural.

That was the first thing Mutt noticed.

Not the cold.

Not the dark.

Not even the silence.

The silence at least made sense.

The mountain itself didn’t.

The tunnels no longer resembled buried architecture. They looked grown. Vast metallic arteries ran beneath the rock in smooth geometric patterns while translucent hard-light veins pulsed slowly beneath the floors and walls like circulation inside some gigantic sleeping organism.

And every few minutes—

something moved.

Not visibly.

Just enough.

A distant groan.

A vibration under their boots.

Mutt hated it immediately.

“Remind me again why the hell we're the ones down here?” He asked, glancing over at Ketter.

Ketter looked back at him with half a grin.

“Who was it that said, *'We're the best, the bravest, and frankly the only ones dumb enough to do it?'*”

Mutt stared at him for a second.

“Pretty sure that was you.”

“Exactly.”

Ketter's grin widened.

“I stand by it.”

Their flashlights cut thin white tunnels through the darkness while the squad advanced cautiously across another enormous chamber lined with towering Forerunner pylons. The ceiling disappeared high above into blackness so deep the beams couldn’t reach it.

Ketter glanced upward nervously.

“Anybody else feel like something’s watching us?”

“Yes,” said literally everybody.

“Great.”

Rook moved at point beside Voss, rifle raised, both women scanning every doorway and elevated platform like they expected the walls themselves to open fire.

Which honestly felt possible down here.

Mech stopped suddenly near one wall panel.

“Hold up.”

The others froze instantly.

She crouched beside a glowing hard-light interface partially buried beneath dust and ancient debris.

“It’s active.”

“That’s not comforting,” Mutt muttered.

Mech brushed dust from the panel carefully.

Forerunner glyphs ignited across the surface in pale blue light.

And then the room answered.

A low mechanical hum rolled through the chamber.

Lights flickered awake one by one far overhead.

Ancient systems shuddered back to life.

Ketter immediately took two steps backward.

“Oh absolutely fuck this.”

The chamber illuminated slowly in stages:

- endless metallic walkways,
- suspended hard-light bridges,
- enormous circular machines embedded into the walls,
- and massive vertical shafts descending far below the visible structure.

The scale of it made Mutt’s stomach tighten.

This wasn’t a ruin anymore.

It was a facility.

A functioning one.

And somehow that was worse.

Mech stared upward with visible awe.

“My God…”

Mercer looked around the chamber with the expression of a man watching his future therapy bills multiply.

“I preferred it when this place was dark.”

Then it came again.

That sound.

A deep metallic call echoed from somewhere far below in the depths of the installation.

Low.

Powerful.

Ancient.

It reminded them of an orca's call.

If an orca had been built from steel, machinery, and forgotten technology.

The sound rolled through the corridors like a living thing.

Resonating through walls.

Through armor.

Through bone.

It wasn't something they heard so much as something they felt.

A vibration deep in their chests.

Like something unimaginably large had shifted in its sleep.

Everybody raised weapons instantly.

Rook scanned the darkness above.
“Movement?”

“Negative,” Voss answered.

Another bang rolled upward through the structure.

Then silence again.

Ketter swallowed slowly.
“Okay.”
He adjusted the machine gun nervously.
“If a giant robot whale comes out of the walls, I’m shooting all of you and then myself.”

“That’s not how self-defense works,” Mech muttered.

“It is, emotionally.”

They continued deeper.

The corridors narrowed after that, forcing the squad into tighter formation. Ancient Forerunner glyphs lined the walls now, glowing faintly beneath layers of dust and age.

The next chamber felt wrong the moment they entered it.

Empty.

Circular.

Too quiet.

Massive pillars surrounded the room while a single hard-light platform floated above a deep central shaft descending into darkness. The air felt colder here. Thinner somehow.

Mutt’s motion tracker flickered once.

A contact appeared.

Then vanished.

He immediately raised the MA40.
“What the fuck, I read movement.”

Everybody snapped toward him.

Nothing.

Then the lights dimmed briefly.

One second.

Two.

Then returned.

Nobody breathed during that entire time.

Ketter finally whispered:
“If a Japanese ghost child appears I’m resigning.”

“Focus,” Voss snapped quietly.

Mech approached the central platform slowly.

“There’s another interface.”

“Of course there is,” Mercer muttered.

The hard-light console activated the moment she touched it.

The entire chamber exploded into light.

Massive holographic structures ignited around them in pale blue hard-light:

- star maps,
- energy flow diagrams,
- ancient Forerunner schematics,
- and one enormous rotating machine at the center of the display.

The Forge.

Nobody spoke.

Because suddenly they were looking at it.

Not directly.

But enough.

The machine in the hologram looked impossible:
a colossal lattice of hard-light construction rings surrounding a central fabrication core larger than a UNSC frigate. Mechanical arms made entirely from hard-light rotated around the structure while streams of energy poured into the center from distant stellar systems.

Mech stared at the projection in disbelief.

“Oh my God…”

The hologram shifted.

Forerunner symbols translated automatically across the display.

Most remained unreadable.

But one phrase repeated clearly in UNSC translation software:

Ketter turned toward the rest of the team, one hand resting behind his head.

“Well… Looks like we finally found the damn thing.”

Mech’s scanner suddenly began screaming again.

Bright red warning indicators flooded her display.

“Energy readings are spiking.”

“From where?” Voss demanded.

Mech pointed upward.

Toward the holographic star map now rotating above them.

One star pulsed violently red at the edge of the display.

The local system’s sun.

A second translation line appeared across the hologram:

PRIMARY ENERGY SOURCE:
STELLAR DRAIN NETWORK ACTIVE

Mutt frowned.
“…What does that mean?”

Mech looked horrified.

“It means this thing powers itself using stars.”

Silence.

Nobody moved.

The hologram shifted again, showing enormous streams of energy being pulled directly from the system’s sun into the Forge structure.

Then another warning appeared:

STELLAR MASS LOSS:
CRITICAL THRESHOLD APPROACHING

Mercer stared upward slowly.

“Tell me I’m misunderstanding that.”

“I wish you were.”

Mech’s voice had gone quiet now.

Almost afraid.

“This installation has been draining the local star for thousands of years.”

Ketter blinked.
“…Thousands?”

Mech nodded slowly.

“The star’s old already.”
She swallowed hard.
“And this thing’s still feeding on it.”

The hologram zoomed inward.

The Forge’s internal systems unfolded in layers:

- fabrication chambers,
- matter conversion systems,
- hard-light assembly matrices.

Mutt stared at the rotating schematics.

“What exactly does this thing do?”

Nobody answered immediately.

Then Mech whispered:

“It builds.”

The room stayed silent.

She pointed toward the fabrication core.

“This isn’t just a factory.”
Her voice shook slightly now.
“It’s a universal fabrication engine.”

Voss narrowed her eyes.
“English.”

Mech turned toward them slowly.

“It can create anything.”

Ketter laughed once.
“No fucking way.”

“It uses hard-light matter conversion.”
She pointed toward the schematics.
“Mechanical systems. Weapons. Electronics. Armor. Vehicles.”
A pause.
“Maybe entire ships.”

That hit the room like a punch.

Mutt looked back toward the hologram.

Then suddenly everything made sense.

The Banished presence.

The excavation teams.

The interrogations.

The obsession.

Mercer spoke first.

“If the Banished control this thing…”

Nobody finished the sentence.

They didn’t need to.

Because everybody saw it immediately:

- infinite weapons,
- infinite warships,
- endless armies,
- entire fleets manufactured from stolen stellar energy.

An empire that never ran out of resources.

Ketter stared at the projection uneasily.

“So they want this thing to print guns forever.”

“Not forever,” Mech whispered.

The hologram shifted again.

This time showing the local star.

The outer layers were collapsing inward unnaturally.

Solar instability warnings flashed across the display.

Then came the final translation:

PROJECTED TERMINAL EVENT:
STELLAR COLLAPSE / SUPERNOVA

The room went dead silent.

Even the machinery around them seemed quieter now.

Mutt felt cold all of a sudden.

“You’re telling me this machine can kill the fucking sun.”

Mech nodded once.

“Yes.”

No humor now.

No sarcasm.

Just dread.

Because the implications were suddenly enormous.

The Forge wasn’t just dangerous.

It was catastrophic.

A machine capable of draining stars to death so ancient civilizations could build endlessly.

And somewhere out there—
Va'Rukamee and the Banished were trying to wake it fully.

The lights flickered again.

This time harder.

The chamber groaned deep beneath them.

And somewhere below the platform—

something massive activated.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WORTHY

The chamber lights flickered harder now.

Not random.

Rhythmic.

Like the entire structure had developed a pulse.

The Forge hologram continued rotating above the central platform while pale blue light washed over the chamber in slow waves. Massive mechanical sounds echoed somewhere beneath the mountain, deeper now, closer somehow.

And Mutt finally understood why the place had felt wrong since they entered.

It was waking up.

Mech stood frozen beneath the hologram, scanner trembling slightly in her hands as warning symbols flooded the display faster than she could read them.

“This thing is activating,” she whispered.

Voss stepped toward her immediately.
“Can you shut it down?”

“I don’t even know where to begin—”

Her motion tracker screamed.

Every tracker screamed.

The chamber exploded into red contact indicators all at once.

Ketter whipped the machine gun upward.

“What the fuck?!”

Dots.

Everywhere.

Above them.

Behind them.

Moving.

Fast.

Mutt’s blood went cold instantly.

All those flickers before.

All the phantom contacts.

All the strange noises.

Not ghosts.

Not broken sensors.

They had been hunted the entire time.

“CONTACTS!” Rook shouted.

Then the lights died.

Darkness swallowed the chamber completely.

For one horrible second the only thing visible was the pale rotating glow of the Forge hologram above them.

Then came the sound.

A low clicking hiss.

Active camouflage disengaging.

Shapes appeared everywhere around the chamber:

- Sangheili,

- Jiralhanae
- Kig-Yar,
- Banished commandos emerging from invisibility like predators stepping out of water.

Plasma rifles ignited blue.

Needlers glowed pink.

And standing at the center platform behind them—

motionless beneath the hologram—

stood Va'Rukamee.

The crimson armor reflected the Forge light like blood beneath glass.

Energy sword inactive at his side.

Hands folded calmly behind his back.

Like he had been there the entire time.

Maybe he had.

Nobody moved.

Nobody breathed.

Va'Rukamee's voice rolled through the chamber low and smooth and full with hatred.

"You walked the sacred road, humans."

Ketter immediately raised the machine gun.
"Oh fuck you."

The Shipmaster ignored him completely.

His eyes remained fixed on the Forge above them.

Reverent.

Almost peaceful.

“You search with hunger,” Va’Rukamee continued.
“You bleed for knowledge.”
A slow turn toward the squad.
“You endured.”

Mutt aimed directly at the Elite’s head.
“You’ve got about three seconds before this conversation becomes a gunfight.”

The Sangheili looked at him calmly.

“You believe yourselves thieves in the domain of gods.”
A pause.
“But the Forerunners did not build these gifts for cowards.”

The chamber hummed louder now.

Hard-light flowed beneath the floors in bright pulsing veins.

Va’Rukamee slowly extended one hand toward the Forge hologram overhead.

“The Covenant feared humanity because the relics answered your touch.”
His mandibles shifted slightly.
“A truth hidden beneath holy lies.”

Voss narrowed her eyes.
“You followed us here.”

“Yes.”

Rook’s rifle centered directly on his skull.
“The motion trackers.”

“Yes.”

Mech’s voice shook slightly now.
“The tunnel contacts…”

Va’Rukamee nodded once.

“My warriors walked beside you from the moment you left the grounded vessel.”

Ketter looked horrified.
“That is deeply upsetting information.”

The Shipmaster ignored him too.

“You feared the mountain because you sensed us.”
His eyes drifted slowly across the squad.
“You sensed death.”

Then—

he moved.

Fast.

Far too fast.

Even for the motion-tracking systems in everyone's HUDs.

One instant Va’Rukamee stood beneath the hologram.

The next—

the energy sword ignited with a violent scream of blue-white light.

And the Shipmaster crossed the chamber faster than human eyes could fully follow.

Mutt barely registered motion.

A crimson blur.

A flash of burning light.

Then—

Mech made a sound.

Not even a scream.

Just shock.

The blade erupted through her chest in a shower of burning blood and molten armor.

Everybody froze.

For half a second the universe simply stopped.

Mech looked down slowly at the energy sword protruding from her torso.

Her TAC-PAD slowly slipped from her hands.

Until it hit the floor.

Va'Rukamee stood directly behind her now, towering over the smaller human form while blue light from the blade illuminated both of them in cold fire.

Then he ripped the sword free.

Mech collapsed instantly.

"MECH!"

Mutt's voice broke raw through the chamber.

Mercer reached her first.

The medic dropped hard to his knees beside her while blood poured between the shattered plates of her armor in thick dark streams already cooking from residual plasma heat.

"No no no no—"

For the first time since anybody had known him—

Doc Mercer sounded afraid.

He tore open the ruined chest plate desperately while biofoam hissed into the wound.

It didn't help.

Nothing could help.

The sword had gone straight through.

Organs.

Lungs.

Spine.

The smell of burned flesh filled the chamber instantly.

Mech coughed blood across Mercer's armor.

The medic pressed both hands against the wound anyway.

“Stay with me.”
His voice shook violently now.
“Come on kid, stay with me.”

Mech’s eyes found him weakly.

She tried to talk.

Blood came out instead.

“…Doc…”

“You’re fine.”
Mercer’s hands trembled harder.
“You’re okay.”

Everybody knew he was lying.

Even him.

Va’Rukamee stood silently nearby watching the scene unfold with absolute calm.

Like a priest observing ritual sacrifice.

“The Ancients allow humans to enter their sanctuaries, to open the sacred vaults... but none of you possess the strength required to control them. Of all the Prophets' lies, at least they were right about that.

Humanity as a whole is unworthy of the Ancients' gifts.”

Mutt snapped toward him with murder in his eyes.

The Shipmaster continued speaking over Mercer’s desperate attempts to save Mech’s life.

“And now you will die, one by one, at the hands of a superior being capable of claiming these gifts... and ascend.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Mutt roared.

The chamber erupted instantly.

Gunfire exploded.

Ketter unleashed the machine gun with a scream of pure rage while Rook’s

sniper rifle cracked hard enough to shake the chamber.

Banished forces opened fire from every side.

Plasma lit the darkness blue and green.

Needler shards screamed through the air.

Mutt emptied half a magazine toward Va'Rukamee—

and the Shipmaster moved again.

The Elite flowed through the gunfire almost gracefully while Banished warriors surged forward around him.

Jackals deployed shields.

Brutes charged the flanks.

The entire chamber dissolved into chaos.

Mercer still knelt beside Mech firing one-handed with a pistol while trying desperately to keep pressure against the wound.

"Come on," he whispered frantically.
"Come on, damn it—"

Mech grabbed weakly at his forearm.

Her eyes were unfocused now.

"…sun…" she whispered.

Mercer leaned closer immediately.
"What?"

"…the star…"

Blood bubbled from her lips.

"Stop The Forge…"

Her breathing hitched violently.

Then stopped.

Mercer froze.

The chamber roared around him:

- gunfire,
- screaming,
- plasma detonations,
- Brutes roaring through smoke.

But for him—

everything went silent.

Slowly, very slowly, Doc Mercer lowered his head.

His hands remained pressed against the ruined armor long after he already knew.

Mutt saw it happen.

Saw the medic stop trying.

And something ugly broke loose inside the entire squad.

Ketter screamed and charged forward with the machine gun firing from the hip.

Not tactical.

Not smart.

Pure fury.

Rounds tore through two Grunts and ripped a Jackal shield apart in an explosion of blue sparks while Voss dropped another Banished commando with controlled bursts near the central platform.

Rook fired again.

The sniper round nearly hit Va'Rukamee directly in the throat—

but the Shipmaster tilted sideways at the last possible instant.

The round only shattered part of his shoulder armor.

Va' Rukamee glanced down at his armor.

Then he turned toward Rook.

And smiled.

Not mockingly.

Respectfully.

That somehow felt worse.

Mutt slammed fresh rounds into the SOCOM and put three suppressed shots through a camouflaged Elite trying to flank Mercer's position.

The Banished warrior dropped hard.

Another charged him immediately with an energy sword.

Mutt buried the combat knife into its neck and shoved the corpse aside violently.

Everything had become noise now.

Blood.

Smoke.

Hard-light flickering overhead.

Bodies collapsing across ancient Forerunner flooring.

Both sides taking losses.

Both sides bleeding.

But Va'Rukamee no longer cared about the fight.

Because beyond the gunfire—

the Forge hologram had changed.

The central structure was unfolding now.

Activating.

Ancient machinery beneath the mountain roared louder than ever before.

The Shipmaster turned toward it slowly.

Reverently.

Like a pilgrim finally seeing heaven.

Voss noticed immediately.

“He’s moving!”

Va’Rukamee deactivated the sword with a hiss and began walking calmly toward the deeper chamber beyond the Forge platform while Banished warriors covered the withdrawal.

Mutt raised the rifle instantly.

Rook grabbed his arm.

“Don’t.”

“What?!”

“You won’t hit him.”

Another explosion rocked the chamber as Brutes fell back toward the deeper corridors.

Va’Rukamee stopped only once at the far doorway.

He looked back toward the humans.

Toward Mech’s body.

Toward Mercer kneeling beside her.

Toward the rage boiling through Gauntlet Squad.

And the Shipmaster spoke one final sentence before disappearing into the depths below.

“The Forge awakens.”

Then he vanished into the ancient dark beneath the mountain.

Leaving only gunfire, grief—

and the sound of a dying star far above them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BLEEDING MACHINES

The chamber became a slaughterhouse.

Plasma fire screamed through the dark while hard-light from the Forge pulsed overhead in violent golden waves, casting the battle in flashes of holy-looking light that made the blood on the floor shine black.

Mutt barely remembered crossing the room.

One second he was kneeling beside Mercer and Mech's body.

The next he was firing the SOCOM point-blank into the faceplate of a charging Sangheili.

The Elite collapsed backward in a spray of burning blue blood.

Another Banished commando appeared from active camouflage directly beside him—

Rook's sniper rifle cracked.

The alien's head vanished instantly.

"MOVE!" Voss shouted.

Gauntlet fell back hard through the eastern corridor while Banished troops flooded the main chamber behind them.

Ketter covered the retreat almost alone.

The ODST stood fully exposed in the middle of the corridor intersection with the M247H machine gun roaring nonstop from his shoulder while shell casings poured around his boots like brass rain.

"COME ON YOU UGLY MOTHERFUCKERS!"

A Jackal shield exploded under concentrated fire.

Two Grunts disappeared into red mist.

A Brute trying to push through the choke point took half the machine gun burst directly into the chest and crashed backward into the others behind him.

But Ketter paid for it.

A plasma bolt slammed into his left shoulder plate hard enough to spin him sideways.

Another clipped his thigh armor.

The third hit center mass.

Mutt felt his stomach drop—

then Ketter staggered back upright somehow, smoke pouring from blackened chest plating.

“Jesus Christ!” Mutt yelled.

Ketter coughed violently.
“I am—”
another cough
“—having a very bad fucking day!”

Mercer grabbed the back of Ketter’s armor and physically dragged him behind cover just before a Brute-shot detonated against the wall.

The explosion rocked the corridor violently.

Chunks of burning metal rained across them.

Ketter hit the ground hard beside Mech’s body, breathing ragged now.

His armor looked awful:

- chest plate partially melted,
- left shoulder seal burned open,
- thigh armor cracked,
- biofoam leaking through the undersuit.

Mercer immediately grabbed the damaged plating.

“You’re burned.”

Ketter looked down weakly.
“Yeah.”
A pause.
“Not ideal.”

“You’ve got plasma penetration through the upper torso.”

“Is it fatal?”

Mercer checked the wound quickly.

“…Eventually.”

“Good.”
Ketter forced himself upright again, grabbing the machine gun.
“Then I’ve got time.”

Mercer stared at him like he wanted to physically strangle him.

“You need to stay down.”

“No.”
Ketter slammed a fresh ammo belt into the M247H.
“I need to kill that sword-wielding alien mother fucker.”

That caused the medic to say, in a tone that still carried the weight of losing MECH,

“Damn it, Ketter... just give me five minutes and stay still, please.”

That snapped Ketter out of his rage-fueled trance.

“Ah, hell, fine. Doctor's orders.”

He gave him a slight smile.

The corridor shook again from distant noises deeper in the facility.

The Forge was becoming louder.

Awakening.

Massive mechanical sounds rolled beneath the floors now like continental

plates grinding together. Hard-light systems flickered violently across the walls while the entire structure pulsed with solar energy.

Mech's body still rested near the corridor entrance covered beneath a thermal blanket Mercer had thrown over her without a word.

Nobody looked directly at it anymore.

Because if they did—

they might stop moving.

And stopping meant dying.

Voss slammed a fresh magazine into her BR and looked toward the deeper sections of the structure where Va'Rukamee had vanished.

"We destroy the Forge."

Everybody looked at her.

"The controls. The power systems. Anything."
Her voice had gone cold now.
"We can't let the Banished use this thing. Or worse, let them use it and, through their own damn stupidity, take the entire fucking solar system with them."

Mutt glanced back toward the glowing corridors.

"Alright Voss. We need to find a way to stop this damn thing."

Rook leaned beside the corridor opening reloading her sniper rifle with practiced precision.

"And Va'Rukamee?"

That name changed the atmosphere instantly.

Voss looked toward the dark tunnels.

"We kill him."

No hesitation.

No debate.

Just certainty.

Ketter grinned weakly through burned lips.

“Now that,” he muttered, “is a fucking mission statement.”

Another explosion thundered somewhere below them.

Dust drifted from the ceiling.

The entire installation was now practically fully operational.

Mutt checked remaining ammunition automatically:

- four rifle magazines,
- two pistol mags.

Not enough.

Never enough.

Rook noticed him counting.

“We’ll make it work.”

“That optimism feels concerning.”

“I learned from Ketter.”

“Then we’re doomed,” Mercer muttered.

Ketter pointed weakly from the floor.
“Hey, now it doesn't just hurt physically... it hurts emotionally too.”

Mercer finally injected another pain suppressant directly into Ketter’s armor port.

The ODST hissed sharply through clenched teeth.

“Congratulations,” Mercer said dryly. “You can now continue making catastrophic decisions for another few hours.”

“Doc…”
Ketter grabbed his arm dramatically.
“If I die…”

“Just remember... you still owe me money. You know, from that time we bet on whether Rook would give me a chance.”

“As I recall, you failed catastrophically when you tried, son,” Mercer said with a snort of laughter.

“Oh, right... shit, then forget it, Doc.”

That eased the tension of the moment.

But not for Mutt.

Because when he turned around, he saw Mech.

Covered by a metallic blanket.

Nothing of her teammate could be seen.

She was so small that the thermal blanket covered her completely.

Only a streak of blood slowly seeped out from beneath it.

A reminder.

A reminder that she wasn't really there anymore.

That cheerful girl.

The one fascinated by technology.

The one who was, sometimes, far too smart for her own good.

Was gone.

And in the end, what hurt the most was the silence.

No commentary from a TAC-PAD.

No excited theories.

No arguing with Mercer.

No explanations nobody else understood.

Just silence.

The kind that settled heavily in a room.

The kind that made the absence impossible to ignore.

Just absence.

God.

She was really gone.

Mutt rested a hand briefly against the side of the thermal blanket as he passed.

Very quick.

Very subtle.

Rook noticed.

They all felt it.

The squad was smaller now.

Broken differently.

And somewhere ahead inside the ancient machine beneath the mountain—

the thing that killed her was still breathing.

Voss finally stood.

“We move now.”

Nobody argued.

Because ODSTs didn’t really get time to grieve properly.

You survived first.

Then maybe you mourned later if the universe felt generous.

The squad pushed deeper into the facility through another series of narrow corridors lit now by bright light.

And elsewhere beneath the mountain—

Va’Rukamee walked through the sacred place.

The Shipmaster moved calmly through enormous Forerunner passageways while Banished warriors followed at a respectful distance behind him.

Ancient glyphs illuminated his crimson armor in pale gold reflections while the deeper systems of the Forge activated around them.

The Sangheili could feel it now.

The machine awakening.

The old power.

The holiness of it.

Behind him, though still at a prudent distance. Marched Gorvadam and his chosen warriors:
massive Jiralhanae shock troops clad in heavy Banished armor blackened by old wars and blood.

Each carried gravity hammers large enough to pulp human bodies into red vapor.

Gorvadam himself towered even above the others, cybernetic eye glowing faint orange in the dark while chains of trophies rattled against thick chest armor.

The Brute looked eager.

Va'Rukamee noticed.

"You wish to kill them personally."

Gorvadam grinned wide enough to show broken teeth.

"These humans fight well. It would be enjoyable to destroy them, and in doing so bring glory to you, Magnificence," he said in a reverent tone.

"Mm."

The Shipmaster slowed near another enormous chamber overlooking the deeper reactor systems of the Forge.

Golden light pulsed beneath transparent floors revealing impossible machinery moving far below.

Ancient.

Beautiful.

Terrible.

Va'Rukamee looked toward the glowing depths with reverence.

"The humans carry fury now," he said quietly.
"They have lost one of their own."

Gorvadam snorted.
"Good."
He tightened one massive hand around the gravity hammer.
"Grief makes prey careless."

The Shipmaster's mandibles shifted slightly.

"Do not underestimate them."
He turned toward the Brute at last.
"The smaller creatures often bite hardest when dying."

Gorvadam laughed low in his throat.
"I am not afraid of vermin."

"No," Va'Rukamee said calmly.
"That is why so many warriors die beneath them."

That silenced the Brute immediately.

The Shipmaster looked back toward the upper corridors where Gauntlet Squad was advancing through the ancient dark.

He could practically feel their hatred now.

Especially the one carrying the silenced pistol.

Especially the sniper.

Good.

Hatred sharpened warriors.

And worthy warriors deserved worthy deaths.

Va'Rukamee extended one clawed hand toward the glowing machinery beneath the floor.

"The Forge nears awakening."
His voice lowered almost to prayer.

“The Ancients will witness strength once more.”

Gorvadam lifted the gravity hammer onto one shoulder.

“And the humans?”

The Shipmaster’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Break them.”

The Brute grinned.

Then Gorvadam and his hammer-bearing warriors moved into the dark to intercept the wounded ODSTs advancing deeper beneath the mountain.

And far above them, beyond the Forerunner chambers, beyond the mountain rock, and beyond Installation 07 itself, an ancient star fed the Forge of Eternity.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HAMMER

The corridor ahead shook with heavy footsteps.

Not marching.

Impact.

Like something enormous was walking through the mountain without caring what broke underneath it.

Mutt heard the gravity hammers before he saw them.

That deep electrical growl.

Like thunderstorms trapped inside metal.

Voss immediately raised one fist.

“Hold.”

Gauntlet froze inside the narrow Forerunner corridor while pale light flickered overhead through layers of drifting smoke and dust from the previous combat. The deeper systems of the Forge roared somewhere below them now, ancient machinery awakening piece by piece beneath the mountain.

Then came the laughter.

Low.

Deep.

Jiralhanae.

Gorvadam stepped into view first.

The Brute Chieftain looked even larger up close beneath the pale gold Forerunner lighting. Heavy Banished armor covered him in overlapping blackened plates scarred by dozens of wars while the gravity hammer rested across one massive shoulder like it weighed nothing.

Three more Brutes emerged behind him.

All carrying hammers.

All heavily armored.

All looking eager to murder something.

Ketter immediately sighed.
“Oh good.”
He adjusted the machine gun.
“The universe has finally sent me a problem I can truly tell to go fuck itself, and nobody can blame me for it.”

Gorvadam grinned wide.

The Brute’s cybernetic eye glowed orange in the dark.

“The humans send wounded warriors against me?”

Ketter pointed at him.
“You say that like I couldn't beat the crap out of you, you gigantic piece of shit.”

“Focus” Voss snapped quietly.

Too late.

Gorvadam roared.

The Brutes charged.

The corridor exploded into violence instantly.

Rook fired first.

Her sniper round punched clean through one Brute’s shoulder plate hard enough to spin the creature sideways into the wall. Before it could recover, Mutt stepped from cover and emptied an MA40 full auto into the exposed neck joint.

Blood sprayed black across glowing Forerunner metal.

The Brute crashed hard.

The other three hit the ODST line like orbital drop pods.

A gravity hammer slammed into the corridor floor with catastrophic force.

The shockwave threw everybody backward instantly.

Mutt smashed shoulder-first into a pillar hard enough to nearly black out while Voss rolled behind cover firing controlled bursts into the advancing wall of muscle and armor.

Ketter didn't move backward.

Of course he didn't.

"COME ON THEN!"

The machine gun roared.

Rounds hammered against Gorvadam's chest armor in violent sparks while the Brute Chieftain kept charging anyway, hammer raised high enough to cave in a vehicle.

The impact nearly killed Ketter instantly.

The gravity hammer smashed against the floor beside him, detonating the corridor in blue-white force. The ODST got launched sideways through the air like a ragdoll and slammed into the wall hard enough to crater metal plating.

Mutt heard ribs break from fifteen feet away.

"KETTER!"

The ODST hit the floor coughing blood.

Then somehow—

somehow—

he stood back up laughing.

"Oh that's cheating you bastard!"

Gorvadam bellowed and charged him again.

The two collided violently in the center of the corridor:
human strength against Jiralhanae brutality.

Ketter dodged the next hammer swing by inches.

The weapon hit the wall instead.

Forerunner alloy plates bent and warped under the impact.

The entire corridor shook.

Ketter slammed his machine gun directly into the Brute's faceplate hard enough to crack the face plate armor.

Gorvadam answered by grabbing him one-handed around the throat and physically lifting him off the floor.

Mutt fired immediately.

Mercer fired too.

Rounds sparked off the Chieftain's armor while Voss killed another hammer Brute with a perfect burst through the jawline.

The third Brute smashed into Mutt before he could reposition.

The impact felt like being hit by a moving truck.

Both crashed through a crystal-light divider into a lower platform while the Brute roared and reached for Mutt's skull with one massive hand.

Mutt buried the combat knife into its wrist.

The Brute screamed.

Mutt ripped the knife free and jammed the SOCOM under its jaw.

Three suppressed shots.

The top of the Brute's skull busted.

Leaving a spray of blood and brains across the corridor ceiling, spattering Mutt's visor at the same moment the corpse came crashing down on top of him.

Mutt shoved the corpse away gasping for air.

Back above him the corridor battle had become pure chaos.

Ketter was losing.

Badly.

Gorvadam hurled him across the chamber again and the ODST bounced hard across metallic flooring trailing blood behind him. His chest armor was shattered now. One arm barely worked. Blood poured through cracks in the undersuit with every movement.

Mercer saw it immediately.

“Oh no…”

Even Doc sounded defeated now.

Ketter still forced himself upright.

“Still alive, you ugly motherfucker!”

The Brute Chieftain roared and charged.

Ketter met him head-on.

Which was objectively insane.

The ODST dropped the empty machine gun and lunged directly into the Brute’s center mass just as the hammer came down.

The impact detonated behind him instead of on him.

Barely.

Ketter threw his full weight into the attack and, with his armored boots, drove a kick inward and downward into the Brute's kneecap.

The joint fractured with a sickening crack.

Gorvadam let out a pained grunt and was forced down onto one knee, the leg now completely useless.

Not wasting a second, Ketter slammed his fist into the Brute's already shattered facial plate.

Then again.

And again.

Until fragments of Gorvadam's cheekbones were sent flying by the sheer force of Ketter's savage blows.

Gorvadam answered by slamming Ketter into the wall, completely shattering the visor of his ODST helmet.

Ketter cursed after the impact, then grabbed the Brute with both hands and smashed his broken helmet into Gorvadam's face.

Fragments of the high-hardness nanoglass cut across the Brute's face and tore through the eyelid of the one eye he still had left, nearly blinding him instantly.

Taking advantage of the momentary loss of control, Ketter poured all his fury into a barrage of punches aimed at Gorvadam's head.

“YOU—”
another punch
“OVERSIZED—”
another punch
“FUCKING—”
another punch
“GORILLA!”

Gorvadam finally fell to the floor.

Then Ketter saw the hammer handle.

And smiled.

“Oh.”
Blood ran from his mouth.
“That was your last mistake.”

He grabbed the gravity hammer with both hands.

The Brute realized too late.

Ketter planted one boot against Gorvadam’s chest and used every ounce of human stubbornness in his body to wrench the weapon upside.

He activated Gorvadam's gravity hammer.

Uncontrolled energy began pouring from the weapon, arcs of electricity crawling across the massive head of the hammer.

Ketter pressed a button on the weapon's handle, activating a set of miniature thrusters mounted on the rear, dramatically increasing the force of the strike.

The hammer came down hard.

Like a thunderclap.

It smashed into the Brute's torso, cracking the floor beneath him, crushing his heavy armor and caving in nearly half of his ribcage.

Gorvadam coughed up a tremendous amount of blood after the impact.

But he didn't die.

The bastard was still trying to get back up.

Too slowly.

Ketter was already raising the hammer again, activating it once more.

This time, the hammer came down on the alien's supporting arm.

The limb was completely crushed.

Gorvadam screamed in agony, staring at the mangled flesh and shattered bone protruding from his side where his arm had once been.

Then the ODST stood over the broken monster, breathing hard through blood-filled lungs while the gravity hammer crackled violently in his hands.

Gorvadam looked up at him with his one remaining eye.

Ketter spat blood onto the Brute’s armor.

“You know,” Ketter said, a wheezing hiss in his voice from his collapsed lungs, “this is probably going to sound racist on my part.”

He raised the hammer one last time with all the strength he had left.

A horrible crunching sound came from his fractured arm.

“Fuck your entire goddamn monkey species.”

Then he brought the hammer down directly onto the Brute’s skull.

The thunderous impact of the hammer echoed violently through the corridor.

The strike unleashed a shockwave that almost completely obliterated Gorvadam's head.

What remained was little more than a massive, almost symmetrical smear of blood.

Silence hit the corridor then.

The remaining Banished forces broke immediately.

Rook killed one fleeing Brute with a sniper round through the spine.

Then suddenly—

it was over.

Only the hum of the Forge remained.

Ketter stood right in the middle of the carnage.

In some strange, visceral way, he looked like Hercules after slaying the Nemean Lion.

The gravity hammer rested beside him, its energy charge completely spent from that final blow.

Mutt smiled at him for a second.

Ketter looked back.

His face was red.

One eye nearly swollen shut.

Cuts covered him from head to toe.

His beard was matted with blood.

And yet he smiled back.

The exchange lasted only a couple of seconds.

Then the weapon slipped from his fingers.

He collapsed completely forward.

Mutt caught him before he hit the floor.

“Oh no.”
Mercer was already moving.
“No no no—”

Ketter’s armor was destroyed.

Not damaged.

Destroyed.

Internal bleeding warnings flashed across broken HUD panels while blood spread steadily beneath him across the metallic floor.

The gravity hammer impacts had broken him inside the armor.

Mercer knew it instantly.

The medic still tried anyway.

Biofoam.

Sealant.

Pressure.

Anything.

Ketter laughed weakly.

“Doc…”
He coughed blood.
“I think we're a little past the classic: prescribe me an anti-inflammatory and we'll see each other in the morning.”

“Shut up.”
Mercer’s hands shook violently.
“You’re fine.”

“Heh... this time, I don't believe you, Doc.”

Mutt knelt beside him silently.

Rook stood nearby breathing hard, sniper rifle lowered now.

Voss looked wrecked.

Ketter glanced weakly between them.

“Well…”
He coughed again.
“At least Rook finally saw me do something cool.”

Rook stared at him for a second.

Then quietly:

“You were still an idiot.”

Ketter grinned through bloody teeth.
“Yeah.”
A weak breath.
“…but a really cool idiot.”

His eyes drifted toward Mutt then.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“If you survive this…”
another cough
“…delete my search history.”

Mutt barked out one broken laugh despite himself.

“Go fuck yourself.”

“That’s the spirit buddy.”

Ketter leaned back slightly against the wall.

The strength was leaving him now.

Fast.

The ODST looked up at the corridor ceiling.

Golden solar energy flowed through channels of Forerunner technology in symmetrical geometric patterns.

Power pulsed throughout the entire installation, making it seem as though the place itself had a heartbeat.

As if it were alive.

And it was...

Beautiful.

“…Man,” he whispered.
“You know... this place isn't so bad after all...”

Then Ketter stopped breathing.

Mercer’s hands finally slowed.

Then stopped too.

Nobody spoke.

Meanwhile, elsewhere beneath the mountain—

Va’Rukamee entered the central control chamber of the Forge of Eternity.

The room dwarfed everything above it.

A cathedral built by gods.

Hard-light rings rotated endlessly around a colossal central core while stellar energy poured through massive conduits beneath transparent floors in streams bright enough to hurt the eyes.

The Forge was awake now.

Ancient systems responded instantly to the Sangheili presence.

Glyphs ignited around him.

Machines moved.

The very air hummed with impossible power.

Va’Rukamee stepped slowly toward the control platform at the center of the chamber.

Reverently.

His clawed hand touched the interface.

And the Forge answered.

The Shipmaster closed his eyes briefly as golden light reflected across his crimson armor.

For the first time in centuries—

he felt something close to awe.

Then the Sangheili spoke softly into the ancient chamber:

“It was my destiny…”
His mandibles spread slightly.
“…to wield the power of a true creator.”

And somewhere far above the mountain—

the dying star burned a little weaker.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE DYING LIGHT

No one spoke as they moved Ketter's body beside MECH's.

The silence was absolute now, as it often is after a battle.

They were all accustomed to uncomfortable silences.

But what hurt the most was this one.

There was no more sarcastic comment.

No complaint.

No completely inappropriate remark at the worst possible moment.

And the thing that had annoyed all of Gauntlet so much...

Was now the thing they missed more than anything in the world.

The ODSTs moved slowly through the ancient corridors beneath the mountain while pale light flickered weakly across battered armor and blood-covered weapons. Somewhere deeper below, the Forge of Eternity continued awakening with low mechanical tremors that rolled endlessly through the structure like the breathing of some gigantic buried machine.

But for now—

the fighting had stopped.

Only temporarily.

Mutt walked near the rear of the formation carrying Ketter’s machine gun across one shoulder. The weapon felt wrong without the idiot attached to it.

Rook moved to Mutt's side and placed a hand on his shoulder.

He noticed immediately.

And returned the gesture in kind.

Mercer walked in the center beside Ketter's body.

The medic knelt down and placed a thermal blanket over Ketter.

His entire legs still stuck out from beneath it.

Mercer spoke quietly to himself.

"Big, stupid bastard... I'm going to miss you."

Finally, he placed a hand over where Ketter's chest would have been beneath the blanket.

The team left the corridor without another word.

Moving deeper into the lower passageways.

Toward a small chamber.

It looked like some kind of space for energy cells or something similar.

Metallic structures stood throughout the room, with light pulsing inside them.

A series of columns in the center of the chamber provided adequate cover.

Nobody wanted to go farther yet.

Not immediately.

Voss finally stopped near the center platform.

"We rest ten minutes."

Nobody argued.

Mutt approached Voss, who had been unusually quiet since everything that had happened.

It wasn't like he didn't understand why.

Even so, Mutt spoke in a low voice.

“You doing alright, ma'am?”

Voss was staring off into nothing, her gaze unfocused.

Mutt repeated himself, a little louder this time, though still respectfully.

“Imani... orders?”

Voss snapped back to reality and turned toward Mutt.

Her expression was stoic.

Almost empty.

“I… don't know...”

That broke Mutt more than he would have imagined.

Ever since Imani Voss had pulled him out of the pit he found himself in after everything that had happened during his time as an ONI operative, she had always been a leader with a will of steel.

She never wavered.

She always made the right decisions in the field.

And frankly, she had been exactly what Mutt needed.

When the two of them met on T'kani Prime more than ten years ago, Mateo Alvarez was a wreck.

Mentally.

Physically.

There was no veteran treatment program for ONI operatives.

No government support.

No psychiatric evaluations.

No veteran therapy.

Nothing.

You simply stopped existing.

Though it wasn't as if you had truly existed while working for ONI in the first place.

Discharged without honors.

Without recognition.

And completely fucked in the head from everything they had done to him.

Yeah.

It had affected Mat.

And bad streaks tend to lead to bad decisions.

And worst habits.

Mat was halfway through his second bottle of liquor in the cantina-slash-cyber-cabaret that smelled the least like urine in that part of the city.

He had become so accustomed to emotional suppressants that only absurd amounts of alcohol produced a similar effect anymore.

The bartender, a large bald man with a thick beard, walked straight through a holographic dancer who was cheerfully swaying atop the table where Mat sat drinking.

“If you're not going to pay for that bottle and your entire goddamn tab, I'm going to throw you out of here with a pool cue shoved up your ass. Understand, Alvarez?”

The bartender's voice was rough and deep.

Mat smiled, his face flushed from alcohol.

“Damn... I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

The bartender turned red with anger.

Just as he was about to smash the cue into Mat's face, a hand stopped him cold.

“Easy, friend. Let's not do something we'll regret later.”

The voice belonged to a young woman.

Firm.

Confident.

She had African-American features.

Tall.

Athletic.

Her head was shaved clean, giving her an air of authority.

Almost like the image of an Egyptian goddess.

Bastet, Mat thought.

He'd been reading a lot of holo-books on history and biology lately.

The bartender lowered the cue.

After grinding his teeth, he finally muttered,

“Fine. But somebody's paying his bill.”

The woman simply nodded.

“Well, well,” Mat said in the slurred voice of a drunk man.

“And who might my generous benefactor and savior be?”

“Savior? I wouldn't go that far.”

“Frankly, I don't think you're the type who believes in a higher power.”

She crossed her arms.

“Especially if even half the things I've heard about you are true.”

Mat's expression hardened immediately.

“Listen. I appreciate you paying my tab, but... you don't know a damn thing about me.”

He took a long drink from his glass.

“That's where you're wrong, friend.”

Her eyes never left his.

“A person with your talent being wasted in... places like this.”

That last part immediately put Mat on alert, but he continued in a dry tone.

“Mm-hm, sure. If finishing a bottle in one gulp is considered a talent, then I'm definitely your guy.”

Imani replied,

“Oh, I thought a former member of the HELL-HOUNDS would be more useful in the field than in a pigsty like this.”

That got a reaction.

Mat's face immediately showed genuine surprise.

“How the hell do you know who I am?”

He paused.

“Or rather, what I used to be?”

Imani simply smiled.

“Listen carefully. The UNSC needs good assets.”

Her tone became more serious.

“Everything's gone to hell since the AI rampancy crisis. Everything that happened with Cortana has everyone on edge.”

She leaned slightly against the table.

“And now more than ever, good soldiers are exactly what we need.”

Mat answered sadly.

“I'm not a good person.”

He stared into his glass.

“If you're really that good at reading reports written in black ink, then you already know all the shit the HOUNDS did.”

Imani's smile never faded.

“Lucky for you, I don't need a good person.”

She pointed a finger at him.

“I need a damn good soldier.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“And this abandoned bad dog would fit in perfectly with our team.”

For the first time, Mat couldn't think of an answer.

“You know, I think I've got the perfect name for you. And I'm pretty damn good at this nickname thing,” Imani said that night with a smile on her face.

Mutt stared at his Sergeant, Imani Voss, for a moment.

Broken.

Demoralized.

Wearing the same miserable expression he himself had worn the first time they met.

But Mutt wasn't exactly wise with words.

Nor was he a natural-born leader like her.

To him, Imani had been like an angel falling from the heavens with a purpose meant specifically for him.

Following her into the field had been his way of making peace with his past.

With his sins.

But for Voss, losing not one, but two of her people had to be hard.

Too damn hard.

Still, he knew Imani Voss wasn't the kind of person who stayed down.

It simply wasn't in her DNA.

So he said the only thing he could think of.

“Voss, you've always been a pillar for all of us.”

“A guide.”

“We all knew the risks. Hell, I think it's written on every recruitment form and plastered on every Drop Pod hatch.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“Nobody follows your orders because we think we're immortal.”

“Or invincible.”

“We follow you because you're a leader.”

“Because when you make a decision, it's because you trust that all of us can finish the mission.”

He paused.

“And damn it, if dying to save the whole fucking galaxy from a bunch of insane aliens with delusions of grandeur buys us even a little peace for all the shit we've been through...”

“Then God, it's worth it.”

Voss looked at him.

Some of the life had returned to her eyes.

Not much.

But enough.

“So, ma'am, with all due respect...”

Mutt smiled genuinely.

“Get your ass up and tell us how we're gonna finish this thing once and for all.”

Imani couldn't help smiling back.

“Damn it, Alvarez.”

“Thanks.”

Then she pointed a finger at him.

“But when we get back, I'm filing a report for insulting a superior officer.”

“Heh.”

Mutt chuckled.

“That never stopped Ketter from doing it.”

For the first time in what felt like hours, Voss laughed.

“Alright, team, gather up,” Voss said in her usual commanding tone, like a lioness calling her pride.

“We've got a job to do.”

“And hell, we're not going to let the deaths of two members of Gauntlet mean nothing.”

“We're going to make them pay for all of it, even if we have to blow up the whole damn Ring.”

Morale had returned.

And Mutt was glad to see it.

Though the part about *blowing up the whole damn Ring* had sounded a little...

A little too serious for his liking.

Rook, who had overheard part of the conversation between Mutt and Voss, spoke in her usual cold tone.

“I don't think we'll have to go that far, ma'am.”

She held up a TAC-PAD.

“I recovered MECH's TAC-PAD. I think the girl already had a plan for us.”

That immediately brought the weight of the loss back into Voss's stomach.

Damn. This kid really was one step ahead of us.

“Alright,” Voss said. “What did she find?”

Rook glanced at the display.

“She found a way to shut down the Forge.”

“Or rather, overload it.”

“Blow it up. I don't know.”

“The only part of her notes I fully understood was the last entry.”

She scrolled through the data.

“It says that beneath the control chamber there's a solar-energy concentrator.”

“One that's already fairly unstable.”

“If we can disconnect the concentrators, the entire Forge destabilizes and collapses in on itself due to the energy deficit.”

Mutt blinked.

Ketter would've said he didn't understand a damn word of that.

And honestly...

The only part Mutt really understood was the phrase:

Blow it up.

Voss took a moment to think, carefully reading through MECH's notes.

Finally, she turned to the rest of the team and said,

“I think I've got it.”

“The Forge uses energy from the nearest star to operate, but those stupid Banished either don't know or don't care that they'll turn this entire solar system into a goddamn supernova if it means getting their hands on their precious arsenal.”

Mutt spoke quietly.

“Entire ships too.”

He thought about the enormous, completely empty hangars.

And the massive entrance large enough to accommodate entire fleets.

“And if they manage to get the Forge out of here, they could take it to any star, drain it, and repeat the damn cycle as many times as they want,” Rook said in a worried tone.

Nobody liked that thought.

An empire with infinite production capabilities.

Infinite war.

The Banished would stop being raiders.

They would become a civilization-ending machine.

Mercer leaned back against the wall beside Mutt.

“So how exactly do four exhausted ODSTs stop an ancient god factory?”

Voss activated another section of the Tac-Pad console.

The hologram expanded across the chamber instantly:

- stellar conduits,
- energy transfer systems,
- stabilization rings,
- reactor control pathways.

Mech’s translated notes still floated across sections of the display.

Mutt felt that in his chest.

Even dead Mech was still helping them.

Voss pointed toward the central structure.

“The Forge is unstable.”

Rook narrowed her eyes.
“Because of the star?”

“Yes.”
Voss zoomed inward toward several flashing systems.
“It’s old.”
Another pause.
“Very old.”

Mercer stared at the hologram.

“The Forerunners were using this thing for millennia.”

“And now the star is degrading faster than the system can compensate.”
Voss pointed toward warning indicators flashing across the display.
“If we overload the stellar intake capacitors…”

Mutt understood immediately.

“The Forge tears itself apart.”

“Hopefully before the sun does.”

Ketter would have absolutely hated the word *hopefully* in that sentence.

Rook stood slowly.

“And Va’Rukamee?”

The chamber quieted again.

Because now they were talking about the real problem.

The Shipmaster.

Not the Banished.

Not the Forge.

Him.

Voss looked toward the deeper corridors.

“He’ll defend the control core.”
A pause.
“And he’ll die there.”

Mutt checked the remaining ammo spread beside him:

- two MA40 magazines,
- six SOCOM rounds,

That was it.

Rook noticed him counting again.

“You worried?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”
She checked her final sniper round.
“Means you’re not stupid.”

Mutt looked toward her.

“You think we can actually kill him?”

Rook was quiet for several seconds.

Then:
“Yes.”

That surprised him.

She saw it immediately.

“He bleeds.”
Her expression hardened slightly.
“I watched him get hit.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s easy to kill.”

“No.”
A pause.
“But it means he’s mortal.”

That mattered.

A lot.

Because Va’Rukamee felt larger than life down here.

Like some ancient executioner wandering through sacred ruins beneath a dying sun.

But Rook was right.

He could still die.

Mercer finally stood.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Like grief itself weighed something physical.

“What’s the plan?”

Voss zoomed the hologram deeper into the Forge.

“The central control chamber sits above the stellar regulators.”
She highlighted another pathway.
“If we can overload the energy routing systems manually…”

“The Forge destabilizes,” Mutt finished.

“Yes.”

“And if the Banished try to stop us?”

Voss looked toward the dark lower corridors.

“Then we kill every bastard between here and the controls.”

Simple ODST logic.

The chamber fell quiet again after that while the Forge pulsed beneath them in slow golden waves.

Rook eventually sat beside Mutt near the edge overlooking the abyss.

For a while neither spoke.

Then quietly:

“He liked you.”

Mutt blinked.
“Ketter liked everybody.”

“No.”
Rook rested the sniper rifle across her knees.
“He trusted you.”

Mutt looked toward Ketter’s covered body across the chamber.

The idiot had died smiling.

Still making jokes.

Still trying to keep the squad laughing even while his collapsed lungs filled

with blood.

Jesus Christ.

“I’m really starting to hate this ring.”

Rook nodded slightly.

“Yeah me too.”

Far below them, the Forge groaned again.

Massive ancient systems rotating into alignment.

The star above continued dying.

And somewhere in the deepest chamber beneath the mountain—

Va’Rukamee prepared to become something far worse than a Shipmaster.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PILGRIMS OF THE END

The deeper levels of the Forge no longer felt abandoned.

They felt occupied.

Ancient systems hummed constantly now through the walls beneath the mountain while rivers of light pulsed under transparent flooring in slow golden currents. Massive mechanical structures shifted somewhere in the dark below them with sounds like continents grinding together.

The Forge was waking up completely.

Gauntlet moved carefully through another descending corridor lit only by unstable strips of pale Forerunner light. The walls were illuminated by Forerunner glyphs radiating golden light.

Each of the lower chambers seemed more "sacred" than the last, with metallic ornamentation built into the very structure itself—on the walls, on the doors, and across the floors.

It truly felt now as if all of Gauntlet were making a pilgrimage toward some lavishly ornamented church or temple.

Ketter would've probably said something like, **"Fucking aliens and their terrible taste in architecture."**

Or something along those lines, Mutt thought.

For some reason, the thought felt both funny and sad at the same time.

Mutt adjusted the machine gun hanging across his shoulder. Carrying Ketter's weapon felt strange. Too heavy emotionally. Like the dead ODST was somehow still supposed to be attached to it yelling profanity at the universe.

Mercer walked behind him quietly.

Too quietly.

The medic had barely spoken since Ketter died.

That worried Mutt.

Ahead, Voss slowed near another chamber entrance and raised one hand.

Everybody froze automatically.

Motion trackers flickered.

Contacts below them.

Dozens.

Rook moved beside the doorway carefully and peered downward through a narrow overlook opening.

Then she frowned slightly.

"…They're fortifying."

The squad approached slowly.

The chamber beyond opened into a massive vertical cathedral descending toward the deeper systems of the Forge. Gigantic pillars surrounded enormous suspended platforms while hard-light streams flowed beneath transparent walkways in glowing rivers of stolen stellar energy.

And everywhere—

Banished.

Not random patrols.

An army.

Brutes hauled ammunition crates toward defensive barricades. Sangheili warriors established overlapping firing positions along elevated walkways. Kig-Yar sniper nests overlooked the lower access routes while Phantoms hovered near distant docking structures deeper inside the chamber.

Preparing for war.

"How the hell did they get here before us?" Mercer asked in his characteristic tired tone.

But the old man had a good point.

How *had* all those Banished gotten down here?

Mutt thought about it for a moment.

Then he understood.

The fallen ODST at the main entrance.

He had sealed the entrance from the inside to keep Rukamee's forces out.

And they had been complete idiots.

Because they had never closed it again.

That massive, completely empty intersection on the upper levels.

The enormous one.

It was probably an access corridor for ships entering and leaving the Forge.

A way to move vessels produced by the facility.

But there was nothing stopping ships from using it in reverse.

Nothing stopping them from flying in and unloading an entire damn army.

“Mother of God, we were stupid,” Mutt said out loud.

The comment immediately drew everyone's attention.

One by one, the others began reaching the same conclusion.

Rook clicked her tongue.

“Damn it. So how the hell are we supposed to reach the Forge's capacitors now, with a goddamn army between us and them?”

Mutt studied the formations below.

“…That’s a full defensive grid.”

“Yes,” Voss muttered.
“And it means Va’Rukamee’s already reached the control sectors.”

Far below the chamber’s central platform glowed with brilliant golden light.

And there—

surrounded by Sangheili honor guards and Banished commanders—

stood the crimson-armored Shipmaster himself.

Va'Rukamee remained motionless near the center of the Forge platform while ancient machinery rotated around him like the mechanisms of some gigantic holy machine.

The Banished moved around him with clear discipline and respect. Even the Brutes deferred slightly whenever the Sangheili gave orders.

Religious or not—

the Shipmaster understood war perfectly.

Mercer studied the chamber below tiredly.

"How many?"

"Too many," Voss answered immediately.

A low mechanical groan rolled through the Forge again.

The entire structure pulsed brighter for several seconds before stabilizing.

Somewhere below, enormous assembly systems activated with deafening metallic crashes.

Then the squad saw it.

Far beneath the central platform—

something was being constructed.

A hard-light fabrication lattice rotated slowly around a partially completed Banished vehicle suspended above the Forge core itself. Mechanical arms moved across the frame while molten metallic matter assembled itself layer by layer in midair.

The machine was creating it.

Mutt felt sick.

"Oh no."

Rook stared downward.

“They already started production.”

The half-finished structure below resembled a Banished Wraith tank.

Hard-light circuitry pulsed beneath the armor plating like veins under skin.

Mercer rubbed one hand over his face tiredly.

“So the psychotic alien cult officially has a god factory now.”

“Not fully,” Voss corrected.
She pointed toward several unstable energy conduits.
“The Forge is still fluctuating.”

That was true.

The entire facility looked strained:

- unstable hard-light pulses,
- flickering systems,
- energy surges racing through conduits.

The Forge was old.

Ancient beyond comprehension.

Mutt looked toward Mech’s Tac-Pad still clipped to Voss’s gear.

“You still got her readings?”

Voss nodded.

“Good.”
Mutt pointed toward the unstable conduits.
“Because that thing looks ready to explode already.”

Rook zoomed her scope toward the lower platforms.

“Va’Rukamee knows it too.”

Everybody looked toward her.

The sniper adjusted focus.

“He’s moving troops away from the stellar conduits.”
A pause.
“He’s protecting the core itself.”

Mercer frowned.

“So he understands the risk.”

“Yes,” Voss answered quietly.
“But he thinks the Forge is worth it.”

That honestly terrified Mutt more.

Because it meant Va’Rukamee wasn’t insane.

Not fully.

He understood exactly how dangerous the Forge was.

And still wanted it activated.

Far below them, the Shipmaster slowly approached the central control platform.

Golden hard-light reflected across crimson armor while Sangheili guards stepped aside respectfully to let him pass.

Va’Rukamee extended one clawed hand toward the floating control systems.

The Forge answered instantly.

Massive rings deeper below accelerated.

Energy surged upward from beneath the mountain.

The entire chamber trembled violently.

And somewhere far above—

the dying star burned weaker again.

The Shipmaster’s voice echoed faintly upward through the chamber in Sangheili.

Rook translated quietly from beside Mutt.

“He says…”

She frowned slightly.
“…the age of scavengers is ending.”

Mutt watched the Banished forces below continue fortifying around the Forge.

“They’re not here to raid anymore.”

“No,” Voss agreed.
“They’re here to build an empire.”

Silence settled over the squad again.

Because now they understood the scale completely.

The Banished weren’t trying to survive.

They were trying to become unstoppable.

And beneath the mountain of a broken Halo ring—

they were dangerously close.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE HEART OF THE FORGE

The Forge of Eternity was accelerating.

Gauntlet watched in exhausted silence from the upper observation platform while entire Banished vehicles continued forming beneath them inside rotating hard-light fabrication lattices. The process looked horrifyingly beautiful:

- streams of molten alloy suspended in midair,
- hard-light frameworks assembling internal systems,
- plasma conduits growing into place like artificial veins.

The Forge wasn't manufacturing machines.

It was giving birth to them.

Another Ghost craft detached from the assembly field below and descended toward Banished staging platforms where crews immediately armed it for deployment.

Then another appeared behind it.

Then another.

Mutt stared downward.
"Yeah, no. We are officially out of time."

Nobody argued.

The central chamber beneath the mountain had transformed into a full Banished war foundry. Brutes hauled ammunition. Sangheili coordinated patrol routes. Phantoms drifted between elevated docking pylons while fresh vehicles emerged constantly from the Forge core itself.

And at the center of it all—

Va'Rukamee remained near the primary control platform.

Watching.

Waiting.

Like a priest witnessing creation.

The Forge hummed louder again.

A deep pulse rolled through the structure beneath their boots while light streams brightened across the walls around them.

The holographic schematic hovering above the console shifted again into deeper structural scans of the Forge interior. Massive energy conduits appeared beneath the main fabrication systems, converging toward one colossal glowing structure hidden far below the core itself.

The Slipspace Compression Core.

Voss enlarged the schematic slowly.

"The Forge itself doesn't directly consume stellar energy."
She pointed toward the immense structure beneath the core.
"This system does."

Rook frowned slightly.
"What exactly is it?"

Voss zoomed inward again.

"A Forerunner slipspace compression engine."
Another pause.
"It pulls stellar mass into compressed transit-space conversion fields."

Mutt blinked slowly.
"…I understood maybe four words in that sentence."

"It converts star matter into usable fabrication energy," Mercer translated.

Voss nodded once.
"Yes."

The hologram shifted again.

Streams of energy from the local sun flowed through enormous conduits into the Slipspace Compression Core where geometric structures folded the energy inward before redistributing it into the Forge systems above.

The entire process looked dangerous even in hologram form.

And according to Mech's translated warnings—

it was getting worse.

"The core's degrading," Voss continued.
"The star's old. The Forge has been feeding on it for thousands of years."

Mercer stared at the instability warnings.
"And eventually?"

"The compression systems fail."
Voss looked toward the deeper machinery beneath the mountain.
"Violently."

Mutt finally understood.

"You want to overload it."

"Yes."

That got silence.

Not because the idea sounded impossible.

Because it sounded plausible.

Which was somehow more terrifying.

Rook crossed her arms.
"What happens if the compression core destabilizes?"

Voss zoomed outward again.

A simulation unfolded across the hologram:

- the Slipspace Compression Core collapsing inward,
- stellar energy surging back through the Forge systems,
- fabrication lattices detonating,

- entire sections of the mountain fracturing apart.

“The Forge tears itself apart from the inside.”
She pointed toward the expanding destruction radius.
“The lower mountain collapses.”
Another pause.
“And this entire region of Zeta Halo probably becomes uninhabitable.”

Mercer looked up sharply.
“But the ring survives.”

“Yes.”

The hologram shifted again as another warning pulsed across the display:

SLIPSPACE STABILITY THRESHOLD:
CRITICAL

Mech had already found the weakness before she died.

Of course she had.

Mutt stared at the damaged scanner quietly for a moment.

“Smart kid.”

Mercer nodded silently.

The silence lingered again after that.

Ketter should have been here making stupid jokes about “blowing up ancient alien bullshit.”

Instead his machine gun rested silently against the wall beside Mutt.

The Forge groaned again beneath them.

Another Scarab assembly frame descended into the fabrication field below.

That finally settled it.

Voss pointed toward the lower core sectors.

“We reach the compression chamber.”
She highlighted several pathways descending toward the deeper levels.
“We overload the stabilization regulators manually.”

“And then?” Mercer asked.

Voss looked toward the glowing abyss below.

“Then we run.”

“Love that part,” Mutt muttered.

Rook studied the route projections carefully.

“There’s no clean approach.”

Of course there wasn’t.

Every route toward the compression core crossed directly through Banished-controlled sectors:

- infantry barricades,
- elevated sniper positions,
- vehicle deployment bays,
- overlapping kill zones.

Rukamee had fortified the Forge of Eternity.

Almost as heavily as his old fortress.

And this time, MECH wasn't here to jam communications or create another massive blackout.

Ketter wasn't here either, ready to get them out with what was probably the worst idea imaginable and somehow make it work at the very last second.

There were only four of them now.

And frankly, it wasn't enough.

All of them knew it.

“You realize this is probably suicidal.”

Mercer snorted quietly.
“That stopped bothering me three disasters ago.”

Rook pointed toward another corridor system branching beneath the central

chamber.

“What about maintenance access?”

Voss zoomed inward again.

A thin route appeared beneath the primary platforms.

Smaller.

Narrower.

Dangerously close to the Slipspace Compression Core itself.

“There.”
Rook tapped the path.
“Less guarded.”

“Also directly beside the unstable stellar converters,” Mercer noted.

“Yeah.”

“…Wonderful.”

The Forge pulsed violently again.

This time stronger.

Far below, fabrication systems accelerated further while newly constructed Banished vehicles rolled off assembly platforms toward deployment hangars.

Va’Rukamee was building an army in real time.

And every minute they waited—

the Banished grew stronger.

Mutt looked toward the distant crimson figure standing near the Forge controls.

“You think he knows we’re still alive?”

Rook answered immediately.

“Yes.”

Va’Rukamee didn’t feel like the type to forget surviving enemies.

Especially now.

Especially after:

- the escaped prisoners,
- the camp assault,
- Gorvadam's death,
- and the damage Gauntlet had inflicted already.

This had become personal.

Voss finally powered down the hologram.

Blue light faded from the chamber.

Only the glow of the Forge remained below them now.

"Once we start the overload," she said quietly, "there's no stopping it."

Nobody moved.

Nobody objected.

Because there wasn't another option anymore.

Not after Mech.

Not after Ketter.

Not after seeing what the Forge could become in Banished hands.

"So."
Mercer said with a half-smile on his face.
"We going to save the galaxy or die horribly trying?"

Mutt grabbed Ketter's machine gun and stood.

"At this point," he muttered, "those are basically the same thing."

CHAPTER TWENTY

INTO THE CORE

The maintenance tunnels felt like veins inside a dying god.

Narrow.

Hot.

Alive.

Gauntlet moved carefully through the cramped Forerunner service corridors beneath the main Forge structure while distant machinery thundered somewhere beyond the walls around them. Thin streams of hard-light pulsed beneath translucent floor panels in slow rhythmic waves while massive energy surges rolled through hidden conduits overhead.

Every few seconds the entire tunnel vibrated.

The Forge was feeding harder now.

Mutt hated every second of it.

“These tunnels are sweating,” Mercer muttered quietly.

He wasn’t wrong.

Condensation rolled down the metallic walls in warm streams while static crawled visibly through the air around exposed hard-light relays. The deeper they descended toward the Slipspace Compression Core, the hotter the structure became.

Like they were walking toward a reactor.

Voss led the formation with Mech’s Tac-Pad clutched in one hand. The device flickered constantly now as if struggling to process the insane energy readings around them.

Rook covered the rear silently.

Mutt still carried Ketter's machine gun.

The weapon felt heavier the farther they went.

The tunnel suddenly shook hard enough to throw dust from the ceiling.

Everybody froze instantly.

A deafening metallic roar echoed somewhere beyond the walls.

Then came another sound:

The Forge manufacturing.

Even through layers of alloy and stone they could hear the distant grinding of gigantic assembly systems birthing Banished war machines above them.

Mercer glanced upward uneasily.
"Tell me that's not another Scarab."

Nobody answered.

Which honestly answered the question.

The squad continued downward.

The tunnels became stranger the closer they got to the core:

- gravity fluctuations,
- unstable hard-light distortions,
- strange visual echoes flickering at the edges of vision.

Twice Mutt thought he saw movement inside the walls themselves.

Once he heard Ketter laughing somewhere behind him.

That one nearly stopped him cold.

Rook noticed immediately.

"You heard it too?"

Mutt looked toward her sharply.

“…What?”

The sniper kept her voice low.

“This place messes with perception.”
She checked the corridor behind them.
“I heard my old spotter talking earlier.”

The entire place was playing with reality itself.

Solar energy was literally being fed through a core capable of turning it into physical matter.

Electronic components.

Armor plating.

Circuit boards.

Machinery.

Everything.

Nobody liked that.

Mercer sighed deeply.
“Fantastic.”
“Haunted alien reactor. Exactly what my medical license prepared me for.”

The scanner on the Tac-Pad beeped sharply.

Voss stopped immediately.

“We’re close.”

Ahead, the tunnel opened into a vast circular chamber glowing with violent golden light.

The Slipspace Compression Core.

Mutt stared silently as they entered.

The chamber dwarfed everything they had seen so far.

At the center floated an enormous spherical structure surrounded by rotating hard-light rings and gravitational containment fields. Streams of stellar energy poured into the core through gigantic conduits branching upward into

darkness while slipspace distortions warped the air around the machine in shimmering blue fractures.

The entire chamber looked unstable.

Wrong.

Reality itself bent strangely near the core.

Rook stared upward slowly.
“…Jesus.”

Mercer looked physically ill.
“What the hell is that thing?”

The Slipspace Compression Core radiated terrifying levels of energy:

- hard-light storms arcing through the chamber,
- gravity distortions bending debris into the air,
- flashes of compressed slipspace rupturing around the containment rings.

Mech’s scanner began screaming warnings immediately.

CRITICAL INSTABILITY DETECTED

STELLAR LOAD EXCEEDING SAFE PARAMETERS

CONTAINMENT FAILURE PROBABILITY INCREASING

Voss approached the central control platform carefully.

“Help me.”

Mutt moved beside her while Rook and Mercer secured the entrances.

The hard-light interface activated instantly.

Ancient glyphs flooded across the display in rapid waves while the Forge systems recognized new user input.

Mutt watched Voss work through Mech’s translated notes with exhausted concentration.

“You actually understand this?”

“No.”
She pulled another system open.
“But Mech did.”

That hurt.

Again.

Voss highlighted the stabilization regulators surrounding the core.

“There.”
She pointed toward several rotating energy control systems.
“These maintain the stellar compression balance.”

Mutt frowned.
“And if they stop balancing?”

“The stellar intake floods the slipspace field.”
Her voice darkened slightly.
“The core collapses inward.”

Mercer looked over from the corridor entrance.
“How long until catastrophic failure?”

Voss checked the numbers.

Then grimaced.

“Not immediate.”
A pause.
“But once the overload begins…”
She looked toward the core.
“…the Forge won’t survive it.”

Good.

That was the point.

Rook suddenly raised one hand sharply.

Everybody froze.

Movement.

Far away.

The sound of armored footsteps echoed faintly through the maintenance tunnels beyond the chamber.

Banished patrols.

Searching.

Mutt tightened his grip on the m247h heavy machine gun.

Voss worked faster.

Symbols shifted rapidly across the controls while energy levels inside the chamber began climbing visibly. The compression core brightened from gold to violent white-orange while the surrounding containment rings accelerated.

The entire room shook harder.

WARNING GLYPHS flashed across the display now.

SLIPSPACE STABILITY FAILURE IMMINENT

Mercer looked around nervously.
“Please tell me that’s good news.”

“It means it’s working.”

“That is not comforting.”

Voss finally slammed one hand against the final control glyph.

The chamber roared.

Every containment ring around the core accelerated violently.

Hard-light exploded outward across the room in blinding waves while the stellar conduits overloaded with streams of unstable energy.

The Forge screamed.

Not mechanically.

Almost alive.

Deep beneath the mountain something massive shifted violently as the entire installation began destabilizing from the inside.

Mutt grabbed the railing as the floor shook beneath them.

“Oh that’s definitely bad.”

Rook checked the tunnel again.

Then stopped moving entirely.

Her expression hardened instantly.

“…We’re not alone.”

The chamber lights dimmed suddenly.

Then burned crimson.

One by one, active camouflage fields shimmered into visibility around the edges of the room.

Sangheili.

Silent.

Waiting.

And at the far entrance to the core chamber—

a crimson figure slowly emerged from the shadows beneath the burning glow of the destabilizing Forge.

Va’Rukamee.

The Shipmaster stepped calmly into the chamber while unstable hard-light storms reflected across ancient crimson armor. His energy sword remained inactive at his side.

But somehow that felt worse.

Behind him stood Sangheili honor guards holding position near the entrance while the Forge trembled violently around them.

Va’Rukamee looked first toward the overloaded compression core.

Rukamee turned toward the remaining members of Gauntlet, his black eyes filled with hatred.

Growling, he said,

“You dare destroy the divine? The machines of creation serve now a true

God!”

The chamber shook again.

Hard-light lightning cracked across the containment fields overhead.

“You know something, asshole?” Mutt said, looking at the wound Rook had inflicted with her SRS99-AM sniper rifle, a thin trail of blue-purple blood still staining the inner layers of his armor.

“Looks like even gods bleed.”

He smiled as he lifted Ketter's heavy M247H machine gun.

“And if they bleed...”

“They can die.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LAST LIGHT

The Forge was dying.

It had started as a tremor, then a roar, then something worse—an ugly, constant howl that shook through the chamber walls and made the hard-light around them shimmer like heat haze over a battlefield. The Slipspace Compression Core in the chamber behind Va'Rukamee had gone beyond unstable and was now openly screaming itself apart.

Golden light pulsed through the floor in violent surges.

Far below, the entire mountain groaned.

And the Banished honor guard finally moved.

Va'Rukamee raised one hand.

The crimson Shipmaster did not shout.

He did not need to.

His Sangheili guards answered instantly, energy swords igniting in twin blue-white flashes while the surviving Banished troops in the chamber snapped into firing lines around the control platform.

Mutt had one second to look at the whole battlefield and understand the shape of it.

Rook on his left, crouched near a fractured hard-light support column, sniper rifle up with a couple of rounds left in the chamber.

Voss and Mercer down at the lower platform, already moving to meet the Elites before they could cut off the retreat route.

And Va'Rukamee in the center of everything like the blade of a knife pointed

straight at their throats.

No time left.

No ammo left.

No miracles left.

Just humans.

“Move!” Voss barked.

The first Elite guard charged.

Voss unloaded an entire magazine from her MA40 into the Honor Guard.

The Elite staggered backward, stunned by the force of the rounds striking center mass, his energy shields draining rapidly under the barrage.

When they finally collapsed, the Elite let out a roar of fury and lunged straight at her, his energy sword aimed directly at her throat.

Voss reacted just in time, evading the slash by only a few inches and ending up beneath the towering alien.

The Sergeant then put everything she had into a rifle-butt strike to the ribs.

A sharp crack of breaking bone echoed through the chamber.

The blow threw the Elite off balance just enough to expose his lower mandible and the base of his upper palate.

Before he could recover, Voss rammed the barrel of her rifle into the opening and pulled the trigger.

The Elite's head exploded like a soda can left out in the sun.

Dark blue blood splattered across the ceiling.

The alien collapsed to the floor with a heavy, thunderous crash.

The second guard was already on Mercer.

The medic had no business being where he was, and that was probably why he survived it. Mercer didn’t fight like a soldier. He fought like a man who had spent twenty years learning exactly where bodies failed.

The Sangheili lunged with his sword.

Mercer threw himself sideways, taking the slash across the shoulder plate instead of the chest. The blade carved molten metal and sparks off the armor, hot enough to burn through the fabric underneath.

Mercer hit the floor, rolled, and came up with a med-knife in his hand.

The Elite laughed.

He should have.

It was a human’s little blade against a sword forged for war.

Mercer drove his combat medic's knife hard into the joint just behind the Elite's knee, completely locking the upper articulation of the alien's massive hind leg.

The Elite let out a pained growl.

Now forced down onto one knee and unable to use that leg, the alien thrust forward with his energy sword.

The strike managed to cut through Mercer's chest armor just enough to reach his pectoral muscle.

The old ODST grunted in pain.

“Grrr... you son of a bitch.”

Mercer immediately wrapped one arm around the Elite's forearm, throwing his full body weight against it to keep the limb pinned in place.

With his free hand, he pulled out a biofoam injector.

The same emergency foam used to stop hemorrhaging and immobilize fractured limbs.

With all his strength, he drove the injector into a gap where two plates of the Elite's armor met.

Then he depressed the trigger.

Foam erupted into the joint and hardened almost instantly.

The arm locked solid.

The Elite froze in confusion, momentarily unable to understand what had happened.

His energy sword slipped from his grasp.

Mercer seized it with both hands.

Before the alien could recover, the medic drove the blade deep into the Elite's chest, burying it all the way to the base of the hilt.

The Elite gurgled blood.

Then collapsed heavily onto the platform.

His body landed in an unnatural position, both limbs still immobilized by the medic's handiwork.

Voss looked at him, her shoulder and chest still glowing red from the energy sword's slash.

“Still alive, Doc?” she asked, already exchanging fire from behind a column.

Mercer answered,

“Damn it, unfortunately, yes...”

Voss smiled.

“Heh... at least I can see your sense of humor is still intact, Doc.”

Above them, the chamber shook again.

Hard-light lightning cracked through the ceiling as the Compression Core overloaded somewhere beneath the platform.

Mutt didn’t have time to watch anymore.

Va’Rukamee had moved.

He looked at Mutt and Rook.

Rukamee’s black eyes locked straight onto them, and he growled with a predator’s hunger. In a single motion that was almost animalistic, he drew his sword and ignited it. Crouched low like a stalking beast, he somehow looked even more dangerous than before.

The blade came alive with a pale blue burst of energy, throwing sharp light

across the chamber and turning his red armor into something between fire and blood. He raised the weapon in front of his face and then lunged.

Fast.

Too fast.

Again, his natural speed was pushed even further by the prosthetics in his legs.

Mutt read the movement a split second before impact and threw himself flat to the floor like a man trying to dodge a speeding vehicle. It was ugly. It was desperate. It was anything but graceful.

But it worked.

The Elite overshot him, landing with his back turned just long enough for Mutt to bring up Ketter's heavy machine gun and rake the Banished warlord's rear plates with explosive rounds. The impacts made Rukamee's shields flare and flicker, but the damage stopped there. The bastard didn't even slow.

Rukamee snarled, caught Mutt by the throat with one massive hand, and hauled him clean off the ground.

"Insufferable human," he hissed.

Mutt clawed at the grip around his neck, fighting for air, but it was useless. His lungs burned. The world started narrowing. The pressure of that colossal hand was crushing the breath right out of him.

"Mmm..." Rukamee said coldly, almost bored. "I was expecting a hunt a little more... interesting. What a disappointment."

He lifted the sword again, ready to run Mutt through.

Then—

A thunderclap exploded through the room.

For an instant, time seemed to slow.

A 14.5×114mm anti-materiel round streaked through the chamber like a shard of white lightning and slammed into Rukamee's shoulder, punching through and exiting from the same side of his chest plate. Dark blue blood sprayed across Mutt's visor as he dropped hard to the floor, gasping and coughing for air.

Rukamee grunted low in pain, more shocked by the sight of his own blood than by the impact itself—as if he had genuinely believed all that talk of being a god had made him untouchable.

His head snapped toward the shot.

Rook stood only a few meters away, fully exposed, her SRS99 still smoking.

She let the rifle fall from her hands like an old weapon finally outlived by the moment. No use keeping a giant hunk of metal like that once it had done its job.

In one smooth motion, she drew her M6C and opened fire.

Again.

And again.

The rounds sparked harmlessly off Rukamee's armor, but she didn't stop. She just kept firing, her face set in that cold, deadly focus that made her more dangerous than most soldiers with twice her size and half her discipline.

Rukamee didn't rush her.

That was the worst part.

He advanced slowly now, almost savoring it, like the fact that she had wounded him made her worth taking seriously. Her pistol clicked empty.

Still she fired.

Still she squeezed the trigger, now pressing down on nothing but dead weight and empty chamber.

Rukamee closed the distance, looming over her.

Rook dropped the pistol and pulled off her helmet.

Golden-blond hair spilled over her armor, and her face—dirty, exhausted, beautiful in a way that only made her look more defiant—stared straight up at him. Those light blue eyes didn't waver.

"Do what you have to do, asshole," she said.

Rukamee looked irritated.

Maybe because of the insult.

Maybe because something so beautiful had just made his life so difficult.

Either way, he raised his sword again, ready to impale her while she stood there without fear.

“At least your death will be at the hands of a superior being,” he said. “It was an... interesting hunt.”

“Just do it and shut the fuck up,” Rook snapped.

He was one breath away from striking when something yanked hard at the blade.

The sword jerked back.

Rukamee turned—

And there was Mutt.

Somehow, impossibly, he had thrown himself onto the Elite and climbed him like a cornered animal.

Rukamee snarled and shook violently, trying to dislodge him, but Mutt had already found what little advantage the monster’s anatomy allowed. The massive plates on his back, the awkward angles of his augmented frame—those were blind spots. Cracks. Opportunities.

Mutt drove his combat knife in again and again.

Sometimes the blade struck armor and skidded off.

Sometimes it found softer flesh beneath.

Blood sprayed from Rukamee’s neck.

The Elite cursed and twisted, smashing backward into the wall in a desperate attempt to crush him. The impact rang through the chamber. For a moment Mutt thought his spine had shattered. Pain detonated through his body in a white-hot flood, and he coughed blood against his own visor.

But he didn’t let go.

Not now.

Not after everything.

The pain was constant anyway. It had been constant since ONI. Since the Ring. Since Mech. Since Ketter.

So to hell with it.

If this was the price for a chance to make even a fraction of his past mean something, then a few broken ribs and internal bleeding seemed fair enough.

He kept stabbing.

Kept driving the knife in.

Kept fighting.

Rukamee bucked hard and caught him by the leg.

“Shit,” Mutt muttered.

Then the Elite hurled him across the room like discarded trash.

Mutt smashed into the side wall and slid down hard, half conscious. Warning indicators screamed across his HUD—severe damage to one leg, major trauma to his torso, emergency biofoam already locking him from the neck down to the waist. Even breathing hurt.

But he had done something.

More than something.

Rukamee was bleeding badly.

Kneeling now.

One hand clamped over the wound in his neck.

Still alive.

Still not dead.

“Goddamn it,” Mutt thought, dragging himself upright with every ounce of strength left in his body. “I gave everything I had... and still wasn’t enough for that bastard.”

His hand groped at his side for a weapon.

The knife was still buried between Rukamee's back plates.

Ketter's machine gun was too far away.

Doc's SOCOM was gone.

"Probably flew off when this piece of shit threw me," he thought.

Mutt forced himself to stand.

Every fiber in his body screamed in protest.

He raised his fists—tiny, almost laughably small compared to the massive claws and arms of the monster before him.

"Alright..." he said with a bitter little laugh. "I'm ready for round two, you son of a bitch."

Rukamee rose slowly.

His face was soaked in his own blood.

His black eyes burned like coals in the dark.

He started toward Mutt, fury and pain twisting together in a single, murderous expression.

Then—

A sound.

A familiar metallic click behind his head.

A cough.

A crack.

And then a wet, ugly sound that made the room seem to tilt.

Rukamee froze.

His vision began to blur.

His thoughts slipped like oil through his grasp.

He reached up and touched his forehead.

Something broken.

Something wet.

Mutt stared in shock, not understanding what had just happened.

Then Rukamee's legs began to fail him.

The prosthetics were all that kept him upright.

He turned—

And saw, barely, the silhouette of a human woman with golden hair and blue eyes standing behind the M6C SOCOM she held pointed straight at his skull.

Rook's face was hard as iron.

Calm.

Merciless.

"I was... supposed to be... a god..." Rukamee said slowly, the words dragging out of him.

Rook didn't even blink.

"And now," she said, squeezing the trigger again, "you're nothing."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RUN

Va' Rukamee hit the floor heavily.

For a brief moment, nothing followed.

No gunfire.

No movement.

No one said a word.

Even Mercer and Voss, who had still been exchanging fire with the remaining Elite Honor Guards, stopped shooting.

Both sides were stunned by what had just happened.

The Banished stood frozen, trying to process the loss of their leader.

And Gauntlet...

Well, they could hardly believe it either.

Everything changed when the Forge decided the timeout had lasted long enough.

The installation trembled.

Hell, it felt like the entire mountain did.

Like a volcano waking from a thousand-year sleep.

Then every hard-light panel containing solar energy failed simultaneously.

One after another.

Detonating in brilliant bursts of golden light.

The Slipspace Compression Core blazed.

So bright that the ODST helmet visors automatically polarized, just as they did during orbital insertion when Drop Pods burned through the atmosphere.

It was that intense.

Maybe worse.

The massive rings orbiting the Core accelerated to incredible speeds.

Faster.

And faster.

Until suddenly—

They stopped.

There was no explosion.

Only a flash.

Then, as though a black hole had swallowed every trace of light, the Core went dark.

A heartbeat later, it imploded.

The shockwave rolled through the chamber, tearing across panels, walls, instruments, and entire sections of Forerunner architecture.

Mercer nearly lost his footing and would have fallen to the lower platforms if he hadn't managed to catch a side rail with his good arm at the last second.

“It's happening!” Voss shouted over the roar of collapsing machinery. “The Core's destabilizing! Move!”

The remaining Sangheili in the chamber exchanged quick looks.

Then they came to the exact same conclusion.

When a Forerunner power core enters a critical failure state, priorities tend to change very quickly.

And shooting each other becomes a very distant second concern.

Everyone ran.

As fast as they could.

Trying to cross the chamber before the next wave of implosions reached them.

Rook helped Mutt back onto his feet.

The pain in the leg Rukamee had grabbed before throwing him was indescribable.

Every step sent a fresh jolt of agony through his body.

Whenever he put weight on the foot, it felt as though fragments of bone were grinding against each other inside his ankle.

But pain would have to wait.

Staying there wasn't an option.

The survivors pushed through an adjacent control chamber while the Forge groaned and shook around them.

Voss slowed only long enough to verify that what they had done had actually worked.

She glanced toward a nearby terminal.

The display was still active.

And on its surface, it read:

CORE DESTABILIZATION IMMINENT

SLIPSPACE FAILURE CASCADE DETECTED

IMPACT EVENT:
00:04:31

“Shit. Shit!” Voss shouted.

“The Core is destabilizing way too fast!”

Her eyes darted across the readouts as warning after warning flashed across the terminal.

The tunnel behind them imploded.

Not exploded.

Imploded.

Reality itself folded inward for half a second and swallowed an entire corridor section into nothingness before erupting outward again in a shockwave that nearly threw Mutt off his feet.

Rook moved ahead of them fast despite exhaustion, sniper rifle abandoned back in the core chamber after the final shot. She only moved with that strange cold focus soldiers reached when their bodies were running entirely on momentum.

The Forge groaned again.

A deeper sound this time.

Like something gigantic beneath the mountain had finally broken loose.

Then the tunnel opened suddenly into a colossal hangar chamber.

Inside the hangar, the Banished forces had completely lost control.

Jiralhanae were already fighting one another for the highest position in the chain of command.

Kig-Yar darted between supply stacks, stealing energy cells and anything else that wasn't nailed down.

Grunts ran in every direction like terrified children, arms flailing overhead as panic spread through the ranks.

For a brief moment, the sight reminded Mutt of the history books he used to read.

Especially the ones about ancient wars.

The moment a leader falls, order dies with him.

Only minutes ago, this had been a disciplined warband.

Organized.

Focused.

Dangerous.

But everything had ended the moment Rukamee hit the floor.

And the moment every communications channel announced his death.

Strangely enough, it made Mutt respect his enemy.

Not because he feared him.

Not because he forgave everything the bastard had done to his fellow soldiers and friends.

But because Rukamee had embodied the very qualities the Banished rarely possessed.

Discipline.

Purpose.

Vision.

The Banished had always been scavengers at heart.

Predators gathered around strength.

And while Rukamee had undoubtedly been a murderous psychopath suffering from delusions of godhood...

Damn.

He had come frighteningly close to seizing what might have been the single most important Forerunner artifact any of them had ever seen.

Perhaps something even more dangerous than the Halo installations themselves.

And he had done it with limited resources and a relatively small force.

The proof surrounded them.

Now abandoned.

Row after row of containers stretched across the hangar floor.

Weapons of every type.

Energy cells.

Ammunition.

Vehicles.

Recon vehicles.

Heavy vehicles.

Even partially assembled Scarab frames waiting to be completed.

And towering over everything else, nearly one-third finished, stood a modified corvette-class capital ship.

Part Covenant.

Part Banished.

Gigantic.

Majestic.

Incomplete.

Its skeletal framework hung suspended within the construction gantries, illuminated by flickering hard-light systems that were already beginning to fail.

If Rukamee had been given more time...

If he had managed to stabilize the Forge...

He might have become one of the greatest military powers in the galaxy.

With the Forge's power behind him, he might even have surpassed Atriox himself.

And at least in Mutt's eyes...

That was worthy of respect.

For a second, Mutt almost laughed at how stupid he had been.

He had spent precious moments trying to think of a way out.

Meanwhile, the answer had been sitting right in front of him the entire time.

Rows of fully functional reconnaissance vehicles sat neatly arranged

throughout the hangar, ready to be taken.

Ready to be driven.

Ready to get them the hell out of there.

For the first time since the Forge had begun tearing itself apart, Mutt felt something dangerously close to optimism.

Rows of Banished Ghosts lined the platforms near the chamber exit where the Forge had apparently been manufacturing light vehicles for deployment. Some still sat inside half-finished in the hard-light assembly cradles while others hovered ready above the metallic flooring.

Ketter would have absolutely loved this.

Voss pointed immediately.
“Take one and GO!”

Nobody needed convincing.

Mutt practically threw himself onto the nearest Ghost while the hangar around them violently shook apart. The anti-grav systems whined alive beneath him as the controls activated.

Mercer mounted another Ghost nearby awkwardly with one functioning shoulder.

“You know,” the medic muttered, “I've always hated driving these things. The transmission—or whatever the hell they use instead—is a piece of shi—”

Rook’s Ghost ignited beside them.

“Just drive, old fart!”

“Fucking rude.”

The entire rear section of the hangar collapsed.

A tidal wave of debris erupted behind them.

Voss accelerated first.

“Go, go, go!”

The Ghost shot forward through the opening corridor in a burst of red light.

The others followed instantly.

And suddenly—

it became survival.

The escape tunnels beneath the Forge had transformed into a collapsing nightmare of falling structures, exploding conduits, and rupturing hard-light systems. The Ghost engines screamed through narrow Forerunner maintenance paths while the entire facility died around them.

Mutt leaned hard into the controls as a collapsing support beam smashed into the floor behind him hard enough to launch debris across the tunnel.

The Ghost barely fit through some sections.

Hard-light barriers flickered randomly across the path while bursts of stellar energy erupted from broken conduits overhead in violent arcs.

The countdown kept flashing on his visor.

00:03:42

00:03:41

00:03:40

Too fast.

Way too fast.

Ahead, Voss swerved around a collapsing platform just before the entire section dropped into a glowing abyss beneath the structure.

Mercer nearly missed the turn.

“Holy shit!”

His Ghost clipped the edge hard enough to spin sideways before stabilizing again.

Mutt barked out one exhausted laugh despite everything.

“How the hell did you do that, old man?”

“Shut up, kid,” Mercer snapped back without taking his eyes off the controls.

“I already told you, it's not that I'm a bad driver.”

The vehicle lurched violently as it shot forward.

“These things are just complete garbage!”

The tunnel split ahead.

Rook took the left path immediately.

“THIS WAY!”

Mutt followed her just as the right tunnel vanished completely in a violent slipspace rupture that folded the corridor inward like crushed paper.

The Ghost bucked violently beneath him.

The mountain was coming apart now.

Not structurally.

Physically.

The Forge overload had spread into the surrounding systems of Zeta Halo itself. Massive fractures split through walls and ceilings while Solar-energy storms erupted throughout the tunnels in blinding waves.

Then came the implosions.

One after another.

Small localized slipspace collapses ripping sections of the structure into nothingness before detonating outward seconds later.

The air itself no longer looked stable.

Mutt’s visor flickered.

Gravity shifted sideways.

Then corrected violently enough to nearly throw him from the Ghost.

“Oh this is bullshit!”

The exit appeared ahead suddenly.

Daylight.

Actual daylight.

A fractured opening near the mountainside where collapsing debris poured inward from above.

Voss accelerated harder.

The Ghosts screamed across the final stretch while the entire tunnel behind them folded apart in catastrophic waves of destruction.

The timer hit:
00:00:37

The Forge made a sound then.

A deep impossible sound.

Not mechanical.

Not natural.

The sound of something ancient dying.

Mutt burst from the mountainside into open air just as the entire valley began collapsing behind them.

The mountain imploded inward.

The center simply disappeared.

For one horrifying second the Forge collapsed into itself beneath Zeta Halo in a sphere of compressed light and distortion.

Silence swallowed everything.

Then—

the explosion came.

The blast wave erupted out of the mountain in a catastrophic sphere of fire, shattered hard-light, rock, and stellar energy. Entire cliff faces vaporized instantly while the shockwave punched through the valley hard enough to throw the Ghosts sideways through the air.

Mutt lost control immediately.

The Ghost spun violently beneath him while debris rained from the sky

behind the expanding explosion.

The mountain was gone.

Not destroyed.

Gone.

Collapsed inward into a burning crater of shattered Forerunner metal and molten stone while auroras of unstable solar energy spread across the sky above Zeta Halo.

Mercer screamed something over comms.

Mutt couldn’t hear it.

The shockwave hit again.

A massive chunk of burning debris slammed directly into the side of his Ghost.

Everything exploded sideways.

The vehicle flipped hard through the air before smashing into the ground and tumbling across dirt and rock in a storm of sparks.

Mutt slammed into something hard enough to drive the air from his lungs.

Then he kept rolling.

Spinning.

Tumbling end over end.

Something else stopped his momentum abruptly.

The impact struck his helmet with enough force to shatter the visor and kill his HUD completely.

The display disappeared.

Transparent.

Silent.

His breath still hadn't returned.

Strangely enough, nothing hurt anymore.

He lay there motionless.

The position he'd landed in left him staring only upward.

So that was all he saw.

A sky.

Beautiful.

Blue.

Endlessly blue.

Peaceful clouds drifted overhead.

The scent of wet earth and grass filled the air.

And across the heavens stretched enormous arcs of golden solar light, like vast auroras dancing across the sky.

Majestic.

Beautiful.

The death of the Forge had left behind something strangely beautiful, Mutt thought.

A final scar painted across the sky.

His vision was beginning to darken now.

The sounds around him felt distant.

Muted.

As though the world itself were slowly slipping away.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw someone running toward him.

A familiar figure.

Blond hair.

Blue eyes.

...Rook?

And then everything went dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

STILL BREATHING

The pain arrived before consciousness.

And damn, everything hurt.

Poor Mutt became aware of it one piece at a time.

First, his head.

It felt like the worst hangover imaginable.

Multiplied by a hundred.

Second, his back.

Goddamn it. At this rate I'll be using a cane before Mercer does.

And finally, his leg.

Which definitely hurt.

Just... not as much as he expected.

His eyes still refused to cooperate.

They wouldn't open.

Wouldn't focus.

It felt like being trapped inside a dream, caught somewhere between sleeping and waking.

The next sense to return was hearing.

Sounds.

Familiar ones.

Voices.

Some near or far away.

He couldn't really tell which was which.

Then there was another noise.

Also familiar.

A low, steady hum.

A vibration.

An engine.

Wait...

Yeah.

A vertical-lift engine.

A Pelican.

He had heard that sound a million times before.

Curiosity finally won.

Mutt forced himself to open his eyes.

Immediately, he regretted it.

God damn it, bad idea.

The light was absolutely blinding.

If his head had hurt before, now it felt like the mother of all migraines had decided to personally declare war on his skull.

For a brief moment, he genuinely thought dying in the Forge explosion might have been the better option.

Wait.

I didn't die?

What the hell is going on?

Slowly, painfully, his vision began to clear.

Like the lens of a terrible camera struggling to find focus.

And he immediately got distracted.

Rook sat beside him.

Her eyes were fixed directly on him.

Which honestly felt unfair to spring on a concussed man.

The blonde ODST leaned against the Pelican wall with one knee raised slightly, while the soft lights of the troop bay reflected across pale skin and her light-blue eyes.

She looked exhausted.

Bruised.

Alive.

And unfortunately for him very pretty.

Mutt stared for several seconds longer than medically appropriate.

Rook noticed immediately.

“You’re awake?”

A look of relief crossed her face.

“Damn, I really thought we were going to lose you back there, soldier,” she said as she leaned toward him.

Mutt blinked slowly.

“…I must be dead.”

One eyebrow lifted slightly.
“That bad?”

“No.”
He winced trying to sit up.
“I think I’m in heaven because I’m looking at an angel.”

The silence afterward lasted exactly long enough for Mutt to realize what he had just said out loud.

"…Wow."
He rubbed one hand over his face weakly.
"That sounded smoother in my head."

To his complete shock—

Rook smiled.

Actually smiled.

Not the tiny almost-smirk from before.

A real smile.

Then she quietly shook her head.

"You hit your head really hard."

"Probably."

"That explains a lot."

Pain flared through Mutt's ribs as he finally managed to sit upright against the wall of the Pelican troop bay.

That was when he noticed the others.

Voss sat across from Mercer near the rear ramp holding a medical stapler while the doctor barked instructions through clenched teeth.

"Lower."
Mercer hissed sharply.
"LOWER."
Another hiss.
"Oh my God you SUCK at this."

Voss looked deeply unimpressed.

"You're the one who got stabbed."

"It was an energy sword."

"You still moved wrong."

Mercer looked personally offended.
“I would like the record to show I was actively fighting an invisible alien at the time.”

“And with a goddamn combat medic's knife, no less. Maybe they should issue those energy swords that cut through everything to the entire medical corps instead of these little pieces of shit.”

Voss jabbed the medical stapler directly into his shoulder wound.

Mercer nearly levitated off the crate.

“JESUS CHRIST WOMAN!”

“Hold still.”

“You are enjoying this.”

“A little.”

“You’re a monster.”

Mutt snorted weakly.

That felt normal.

As normal as anything possibly could after all the shit they had been through.

The disastrous drop.

The firefights.

The fortress.

Rukamee.

The Forge.

For the first time in what felt like forever, hearing the team argue and trade insults almost made the universe seem familiar again.

Then the memory hit him fully.

Mech.

Ketter.

The smile faded from his face automatically.

Rook noticed.

The Pelican grew quieter for a moment except for engine noise and Mercer continuing to verbally assault Voss's medical technique.

Rook looked at him, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

"We're alive," she said softly.

"And me in particular, thanks to your incredibly heroic and incredibly stupid stunt, you know?"

For a moment, Mutt had forgotten.

Forgotten how, standing in front of Rukamee, Rook had finally accepted that she wasn't getting out of that fight.

And how he, without even thinking, had thrown himself onto that son of a bitch and stabbed him over and over again.

"I... didn't know what else to do," Mutt admitted, looking slightly embarrassed.

Rook smiled again.

A real smile this time.

One that reached her eyes.

"Heh. That's okay. It's not like I'm complaining."

She folded her arms lightly.

"Although, if we're being fair, we're even now."

Mutt raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

There was a trace of amusement in her voice now.

"After all, I was the one who had to drag your heavy ass onto the flying bucket we're currently sitting in."

For the first time since waking up, Mutt actually laughed.

It hurt immediately.

Every rib in his body protested.

But somehow it was still worth it.

“Wait a second.”

Mutt frowned.

“That explains how I got onto the Pelican.”

He glanced around the troop bay for a moment.

“But it doesn't explain how the Pelican got to us in the first place.”

Voss gestured toward the cockpit with a tilt of her head.

“Apparently, someone had the brilliant idea of stealing high-value UNSC equipment.”

A familiar voice echoed from the cockpit immediately.

“I prefer the term tactically acquired.”

Mutt blinked.

“No fucking way.”

He forced himself upright enough to see toward the cockpit.

And there—

hands on the controls like he absolutely belonged there—

sat Newbie.

With a bandage covering half of his face and one eye still bruised dark from the beating.

But grinning like an idiot beneath the glow of the cockpit displays.

The young Marine glanced back over one shoulder.

“How's it going, Mutt.”

Mutt stared at him.
“Ha, ha. So let me get this straight.”

Mutt shook his head with a tired grin.

“How the hell were you able to steal a Pelican from the UNSC, but when it came to getting yourself out of trouble with the Banished, I had to literally crawl through shit to rescue you, huh, kid?”

“I guess I learned a few things since then.”

The young ODST grinned, despite the bandages and bruises.

“You know, I think the nickname *Newbie* is getting a little outdated.”

He leaned back in his seat.

“Maybe *Fist.*”

He thought about it for a second.

“Or maybe *Hammer* would be better.”

A small smile crossed his face.

“What do you think, boss?”

Voss let out a laugh.

A real one.

The kind none of them had heard in quite a while.

“I think *Black Eye* or *Piss-Pants* would suit you a lot better...”

The young ODST immediately looked offended.

Voss only smirked.

“But let me think about it.”

She crossed her arms and nodded to herself as if considering a matter of great importance.

“You know, I'm actually pretty damn good at nicknames.”

She said it while looking directly at Mutt.

Then Voss shifted her gaze and looked toward Rook.

“So, what does my favorite pair think about it? Mutt and Kitty.”

Rook rolled her eyes immediately.

But she was still smiling.

Outside the Pelican canopy, Zeta Halo stretched endlessly beneath them.

The sky above the ring still burned faintly gold near the distant mountains where the Forge of Eternity had died beneath stone, fire, and collapsing energy. Massive smoke plumes climbed into the clouds while broken hard-light storms flickered across the horizon like dying auroras.

The Forge was gone.

Va’Rukamee was gone.

The Banished had lost their god-machine.

And somehow—

against every possible statistical probability—

some of them had survived.

Mutt leaned his head back against the Pelican wall slowly.

Everything hurt.

His armor was wrecked.

His squad was broken.

Two of his friends were dead.

But the engines kept humming.

Rook sat beside him alive and smiling faintly to herself for reasons she’d probably never admit.

Mercer was still complaining.

Voss was still giving orders.

And ahead of them, FOB CONDOR waited somewhere beyond the clouds.

For now—

that was enough.

The Pelican disappeared into the night carrying the last survivors of Gauntlet Squad home.

APPENDIX A

PERSONNEL FILES

MATEO "MUTT" ALVAREZ

Rank: Corporal (ODST)
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam
Specialization: General Combat Operations

Mateo Alvarez is a veteran Orbital Drop Shock Trooper known for his adaptability under pressure and ability to perform effectively in almost any combat role. While not considered a specialist in any single field, his versatility makes him one of the most reliable members of Gauntlet.

Alvarez wears a standard black-and-gray ODST combat suit equipped with a modified helmet featuring integrated night vision and telescopic targeting systems. His operational history includes numerous reconnaissance, infiltration, and ONI-directed missions throughout UNSC-controlled space.

Among his teammates, Alvarez is known for his sarcasm, improvisational thinking, and tendency to survive situations that should have killed him.

HANA "ROOK" VUKOVIĆ

Rank: Lieutenant
Assignment: Formerly Saber Team / Attached to Gauntlet
Specialization: Long-Range Reconnaissance and Precision Marksmanship

One of the few surviving members of Saber Team, Hana Vuković is a highly skilled sniper and reconnaissance specialist.

Her armor combines ODST and standard UNSC Marine components and is painted in a winter camouflage pattern. Her helmet features distinctive white markings resembling fangs surrounding the visor.

Reserved and disciplined, Vuković rarely speaks more than necessary.

Following the destruction of Saber Team on Installation 07, she became attached to Gauntlet operations.

Her confirmed long-range elimination count places her among the most effective marksmen operating within the UNSC.

IMANI VOSS

Rank: Sergeant
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam Commander
Specialization: Close Quarters Combat

Sergeant Imani Voss serves as the commanding officer of Gauntlet.

An African-American veteran with a distinctive scar above her right eyebrow, Voss is known for her aggressive leadership style and unwavering commitment to mission objectives.

Her customized black-and-gray armor includes modifications optimized for close-quarters combat. She demonstrates exceptional proficiency with UNSC combat shotguns and urban warfare tactics.

Personnel evaluations frequently describe her as intimidating, highly effective, and "unlikely to accept excuses from anyone."

JACE KETTER

Rank: Corporal
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam
Specialization: Heavy Weapons and Demolitions

Physically imposing even by ODST standards, Jace Ketter is a former collegiate field marshal whose military career was interrupted by the outbreak of war.

Standing significantly taller and broader than most UNSC personnel, Ketter wears heavily modified black-and-red armor reinforced for explosive handling and heavy impact operations.

An expert in heavy weapons systems and demolitions, Ketter possesses the physical qualifications necessary for consideration as a Spartan-IV candidate.

Official promotion recommendations have repeatedly been denied due to persistent disciplinary issues, insubordination, and an inability—or unwillingness—to maintain professional language when interacting with superior officers.

DALIA "MECH" RAINES

Rank: Specialist
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam
Specialization: Engineering and Technical Operations

Dalia Raines serves as Gauntlet's primary technical specialist.

Pale-skinned, freckled, red-haired, and physically small in stature, Raines compensates through exceptional intelligence and technical aptitude.

Her expertise includes Banished technology analysis, field repairs, tactical systems integration, and electronic warfare.

Raines applied for Officer Candidate School on three separate occasions. All applications were denied due to physical evaluation standards despite consistently superior academic performance.

Her standard gray armor is equipped with a specialized field-repair backpack containing diagnostic systems, modular tools, and emergency maintenance equipment.

ELIAS "DOC" MERCER

Rank: Senior Combat Medic
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam
Specialization: Battlefield Medicine

Elias Mercer is one of the oldest active members of Gauntlet and one of its most valuable assets.

A veteran of the Human-Covenant War, Mercer has participated in military operations dating back decades. His experience treating battlefield casualties has earned him a reputation as one of the finest combat medics available to UNSC forces.

Mercer wears a hybrid ODST/UNSC Medical Corps armor configuration

equipped with advanced trauma kits, static gel dispensers, and emergency surgical equipment.

Despite his seemingly emotionless demeanor and perpetual exhaustion, Mercer is deeply committed to the survival of every member of his team.

He remains armed with the same M6C/SOCOM pistol issued during his deployment to New Mombasa.

SOREN "NEWBIE" BALE

Rank: Private First Class
Assignment: Gauntlet Fireteam
Specialization: General Infantry Operations

The youngest and newest member of Gauntlet.

Tall, thin, and visibly less experienced than the rest of the team, Soren Bale earned the nickname "Newbie" almost immediately upon joining the unit.

His ODST armor remains noticeably newer than the equipment used by most veteran operators.

Bale's transfer into Gauntlet was strongly supported by his parents, both decorated military veterans of the Human-Covenant War.

While lacking experience, Bale has demonstrated determination, loyalty, and a willingness to learn under combat conditions.

Personnel reviews indicate significant potential for future advancement should he survive long enough to acquire it.

END OF FILE

APPENDIX B

BANISHED PERSONNEL OF INTEREST

Source: Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI)
Classification: RESTRICTED
The following files contain information regarding high-value Banished personnel encountered during operations on Installation 07.

VA 'RUKAMEE

Species: Sangheili
Affiliation: Banished
Rank: Shipmaster
Threat Assessment: EXTREME

Va 'Rukamee is a former Covenant Shipmaster whose military career predates the end of the Human-Covenant War.

Unlike many Sangheili who abandoned the Covenant faith following the Great Schism, Rukamee remained deeply attached to the religious beliefs and traditions of the former empire. Numerous intelligence reports indicate he continued to view humanity as heretical interlopers upon sacred Forerunner sites.

His rank was earned through exceptional battlefield leadership, strategic planning, and extraordinary proficiency in close-quarters combat.

Historical Covenant records attribute thousands of confirmed human casualties to military campaigns directly commanded by Rukamee.

Following the collapse of the Covenant, Rukamee eventually aligned himself with Atriox and the Banished.

While ideological differences existed between the two leaders, Atriox reportedly valued Rukamee's intelligence, experience, and ability to

command veteran troops under difficult combat conditions.

By the time of the Installation 07 conflict, Rukamee had become one of Atriox's most valuable military assets.

Unlike many Banished commanders, Rukamee favored patience over aggression and strategy over brute force. His operations frequently involved reconnaissance, ambush tactics, and deliberate manipulation of enemy movements before committing forces to battle.

Field reports consistently describe him as calm, methodical, disciplined, and exceptionally dangerous.

Multiple encounters with UNSC personnel suggest that Rukamee viewed the Forerunners with near-religious reverence and considered himself a protector of their legacy.

His final actions on Installation 07 indicate a willingness to sacrifice himself in pursuit of Forerunner knowledge and power.

GORVADAM

Species: Jiralhanae
Affiliation: Banished
Rank: Chieftain
Threat Assessment: HIGH

Gorvadam served as second-in-command to Shipmaster Va 'Rukamee during Banished operations across Installation 07.

A veteran Jiralhanae warrior, Gorvadam participated in numerous campaigns following the rise of Atriox and quickly developed a reputation for extreme violence and battlefield brutality.

Unlike his superior, Gorvadam displayed little interest in strategy, politics, or Forerunner history.

His preferred solution to most tactical situations involved overwhelming force.

Intelligence gathered from Banished communications suggests Gorvadam took personal enjoyment in fighting opponents he considered worthy adversaries.

He frequently sought direct combat opportunities and often refused to delegate engagements he believed would provide an entertaining challenge.

His weapon of choice was a heavily modified gravity hammer responsible for numerous UNSC casualties during operations on Installation 07.

Despite his lack of strategic sophistication, Gorvadam's combat instincts, physical strength, and ability to inspire fear among both allies and enemies made him a valuable battlefield commander.

Analysts frequently noted that Gorvadam's greatest strength was also his greatest weakness.

He possessed tremendous confidence in his physical superiority and routinely underestimated opponents he viewed as weaker than himself.

When operating independently, Gorvadam represented a severe tactical threat.

When operating alongside Va 'Rukamee, however, the two commanders formed an exceptionally dangerous partnership.

Rukamee provided patience, planning, and intelligence.

Gorvadam provided violence.

Together they were responsible for multiple successful Banished operations throughout the northern regions of Installation 07.

Several ONI analysts concluded that the combination of Sangheili precision and Jiralhanae aggression made the pair among the most dangerous Banished commanders encountered during the campaign.

END OF FILE

GLOSSARY

UNSC

United Nations Space Command.
The primary military, exploratory, and governmental organization of humanity. Responsible for defending human space against external threats.

ONI

Office of Naval Intelligence.
The intelligence branch of the UNSC. Specializes in espionage, covert operations, intelligence gathering, and highly classified research projects.

ODST

Orbital Drop Shock Troopers.
Elite UNSC shock infantry deployed via single-person drop pods directly into combat zones. Known for their unofficial motto:

"Feet First Into Hell."

Spartan

Genetically and technologically enhanced super-soldiers created by the UNSC. Widely regarded as humanity's most effective warriors.

Banished

A powerful mercenary empire founded by Atriox following his rebellion against the Covenant. Comprised of Jiralhanae, Sangheili, Kig-Yar, Unggoy, and numerous other species united through strength rather than religion.

Forerunner

An ancient and highly advanced civilization that existed over 100,000 years before humanity. Their technology, installations, and secrets remain scattered throughout the galaxy.

Installation 07

Also known as **Zeta Halo**.

One of the original Halo installations built by the Forerunners. Considered among the oldest, largest, and most mysterious structures ever discovered by humanity.

The events of *Halo: Shattered Sun* take place within its northern territories.

FOB

Forward Operating Base.
Temporary military strongholds established by the UNSC to support field operations, logistics, and regional defense.

Covenant

A former theocratic alliance of alien species that waged war against humanity for nearly three decades before collapsing during the Great Schism.